







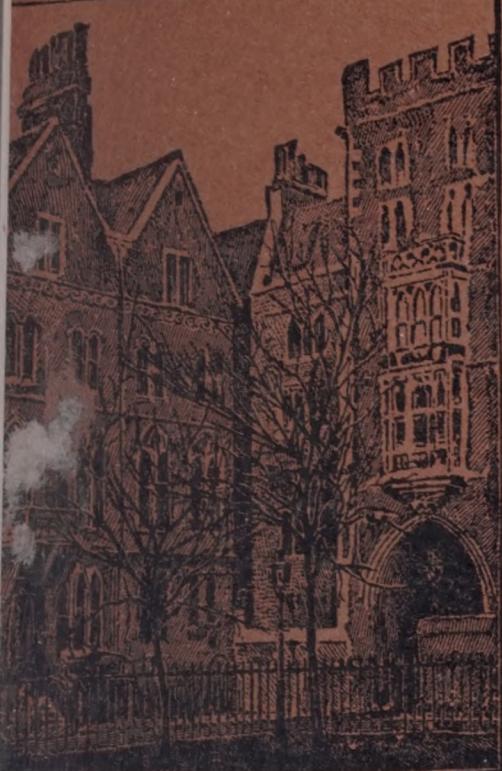






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BY

FLORENCE WARDEN

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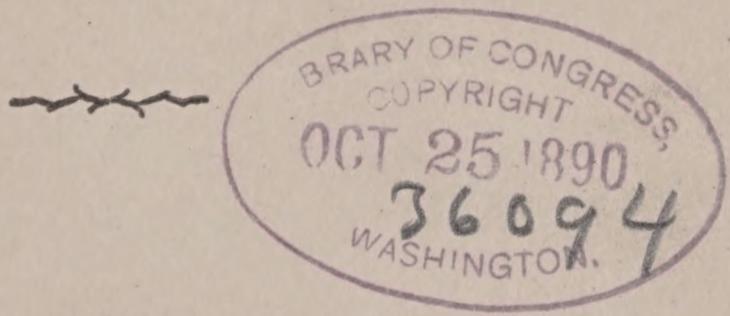
## Westminster Series.

# MISSING—A YOUNG GIRL

BY  
FLORENCE WARDEN

AUTHOR OF "THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH," "NURSE  
REVEL'S MISTAKE," ETC.

*AUTHORIZED EDITION*



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# MISSING—A YOUNG GIRL.

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## CHAPTER I.

“My dear Amy, she’s five-and-thirty if she’s a day! Would you have me marry a woman seven years older than myself?”

“In a general way — no, of course not. In this particular case — yes, most decidedly. Ernestine Halliday is the youngest woman of five-and-thirty (if she is five-and-thirty, which I beg leave to doubt) that I ever met. She is a delightful woman; she is very rich; and Americans are all the rage now. Why, more than half the best marriages are made by Americans, and if Ernestine chose she could be a countess to-morrow.”

“To-morrow! No, Amy, my love; even earls and New York heiresses can’t get married without one whole day’s notice. And that is by special license, which has always seemed to me a ridiculous waste of money. Indeed, I’ve made

up my mind, that if any rich girl ever takes such a fancy to me that she offers to buy a special license and marry me off-hand, I will beg her to calm her impetuosity, consent to wait the twenty-one days, and let me have the difference to spend."

A peal of hearty laughter made Walter Drake look round as he finished this declaration. Miss Ernestine Halliday, faultlessly dressed in pearl-gray silk, with a tiny bonnet to match in which was one spray of scarlet blossom, was standing at one of the many doors of the tiny *salon* of Mrs. Plunket's flat, at No. 35, Boulevart Haussmann, Paris. The exhibition, the great, noisy, crowded Exhibition, was in full swing. Paris was full of pleasure-seeking foreigners whose money had been pouring for the past three months into capacious French pockets. Mrs. Plunket, of Eaton Square, more socially important than wealthy, and Miss Ernestine Halliday, of Chicago, more wealthy than socially important, were sharing a tiny flat at the top of one of the big Boulevart Haussmann houses, the permanent tenant of which had joined the rest of the Parisians proper in giving up their pretty capital during the dog-days to the long-suffering foreigner. And Mrs. Plunket's good-looking young brother was staying with them to serve as escort.

Miss Halliday was not handsome, but she was as good-looking as she had ever been — which, after all, is more than you can say of a pretty woman at thirty-five, and she knew how to make the very best of herself — which is more than you can say of most women at any age. And the expression of her dark-skinned face was so bright and good-humored that it seemed open to question whether young Dr. Drake, if he should decide upon throwing her the handkerchief, might not have gone further and fared very much worse.

Two things, however, stood in the way. The one was Miss Halliday's money. A few hundreds a year with one's wife would be a very good thing, but when it came to thousands the case was different ; Walter Drake had no fancy for the position of becoming merely a rich woman's husband. The second obstacle — well, perhaps Miss Halliday guessed that too, as she certainly did the first.

At the sound of her laughter he had sprung up from his chair, blushing furiously and hoping she had not heard the whole of his speech and the little bit of talk with his sister which had preceded it. But Miss Halliday was one of those women who never hear more than they are intended to hear, or see more than they are

wanted to see, and who go through life with the reputation of being ‘awfully nice’ in consequence.

“What difference is this that your brother wants to have to spend, Amy?” she asked, thereby relieving Walter’s feelings somewhat. “Are we to dine at the ‘*Palais Royal*’ instead of at *Brébant’s*, and then to be left to find consolation in each other’s society while you rush off to gamble away ‘the difference’ in *paris-mutuels*? ”

“You are going to find your consolation in loftier society than mine this evening, Miss Halliday. The *Vicomte de Lussac* and *Monsieur Montferrand* are to be your escort to-night.”

“But we could find room for you!”

A slight shade of disappointment and annoyance passed over Miss Halliday’s face, and then she threw at him a quick glance, which had the effect of making him blush. He answered her with his eyes, as if in mock humility, fixed upon the ground.

“You and Amy were both so horribly cruel to me last night that I’m sulking, so that you may discover my value.”

“Why do you young Englishmen look down upon young Frenchmen? I’m sure the *vicomte* and his friend are both very nice little fellows.”

“Little fellows! That’s it. I can’t help looking down upon them.”

“And why does a tall man always think himself so much better than a short one?”

“And why — if we’re all going to ask riddles without waiting for the answers,” broke in Mrs. Plunket — “are you always dressed before anybody else, Ernestine?”

“It’s the horrible commercial taint in my blood, dear. If my father and grandfather had been late at their stores, they would have lost their customers; and the old habit has descended to me, though nothing remains of either stores or customers save the merry little dollars they brought in.”

“Well, that is quite enough to remember them by. Now, if you will promise not to be too unkind to poor Walter for his defection — and he really has a bad headache,” said Mrs. Plunket, caressing her brother’s handsome dark head as he leaned back in his easy chair, “I’ll go and get dressed too. Those young fellows will be here in a quarter of an hour. They are as punctual as you are.”

Mrs. Plunket disappeared through one of the doors with which the little *salon* was perforated on all sides; and her brother was left with Miss Halliday. He had an uneasy feeling

that she had found him out, and he would have got away if he could. She sprang up from the little cane chair on which she had for a moment sat down, and passed Walter on her way to the nearest of the two French windows.

“A headache, has he, poor fellow!” she said, with a little mocking glance; “come out on the balcony. The sun is not hot now; the air will do you good.”

Young Dr. Drake’s face, burnt red as it was by the sun, grew several shades deeper yet in color.

“I don’t care for the balcony,” he said, adopting an indifferent drawl which, however, was not a great success.

“Not in the *daytime* that is, of course,” said Miss Halliday, after a pause, softly, so that the sound of her words went no further than her companion’s ears.

Walter started, got up, and with all his languid affectations suddenly gone, came out after her upon the balcony.

Mrs. Plunket’s flat was at the back of the fourth floor of a house which overlooked a narrow street at the back of the New Opera House. A broad balcony ran from end to end of the suite of rooms, and was divided from the balconies of the neighbors on each side by a high wall of

zinc. The two windows of the *salon* opened on to the middle of Mrs. Plunket's balcony. Miss Halliday turned to the left, and tripped past the one window of Dr. Drake's little bedroom and then the two of her own. This brought them to the zinc wall. She just glanced at it demurely ; so, guiltily, did he.

“ You like to come out here, don't you,” she said, “ to smoke a final cigarette at about half-past eleven, just after we have gone to bed ? It is just outside my window, you know, and I can hear you.”

Yes, he sometimes did stroll out on to the balcony for a last cigarette, generally in fact. He hoped he did not disturb her.

“ Oh no, not at all. You always come so quietly, you know. But — ”

There was a pause. Perhaps she meant it to be an awkward one, intending to force a confession.

“ Dr. Drake, you will think me frightfully impertinent.”

“ Not at all,” said he stiffly. “ If there is anything you wish to say, pray say it.”

“ Well, there is something I want to say ; I can't deny it. Dr. Drake, I didn't leave school yesterday ; I've seen a good deal of the world. There's a hole in this zinc : it gets larger every

day ; you have made it, to look through at something — and the something is a *woman* ! ”

Walter was speechless. To have been found out in this mean and ungentlemanly, or boyish and ridiculous, act was beyond measure irritating.

In the midst of his stammering and stuttering Miss Halliday gently interrupted him.

“ Please, please forgive me. I must go on. I know I am insufferably impertinent — ”

“ Not at all.”

“ But I don’t care,” rejoined Miss Halliday with a whimsical look. “ You know these people are in the same house as ourselves. Their door almost faces ours on the landing. Have you ever seen the man go in or out ? ”

“ No-o.”

“ Have you ever met on the stairs a thin dark man, rather tall, but narrow-chested and with a stoop, who looks like a Greek ? ”

“ I — I think I have.”

“ Well, that is the tenant of the flat opposite ours. He calls himself M. Bertin, so the concierge says. Now Bertin, you know, is the French equivalent for Smith or Brown. He does not look like a man of the best possible character, does he ? ”

“ I am afraid my masculine obtuseness is too

great for me to be able to read a man's character as I pass him on the stairs."

"Never mind his character then. But his wife —"

"She is not his wife."

The passionate emphasis with which Walter Drake uttered these words startled his companion, in spite of the shrewd guess she had made at the depth of the interest he took in his pretty neighbor. Of course he saw in a moment how absurdly he had betrayed himself, and recovering his usual rather indifferent manner, he said, with an uneasy laugh —

"I mean that the object of my admiration — I admit there is an object. No doubt you have seen her — a very handsome fair-haired girl. But she, I say, is not the wife of that hideous rascal."

"' Hideous rascal ! ' Oh, ho ! Then you did notice him a little, in passing him on the stairs ? "

"Well." Walter smiled in spite of himself. "He may be an excellent man, but his appearance is not prepossessing."

"Well, as I was saying, his wife —"

"How do you know she is his wife ? "

"Does she look like his daughter ? However, you didn't let me finish what I was saying. This will tell you what the man's wife is : I cut it out

of the *Figaro* two days ago, and have only just found opportunity and courage to give it to you."

She drew from her pocket, and thrust into his hand, a tiny cutting from a French newspaper. It contained only two short lines, with most of the words abbreviated to two or three letters, informing the public that "La Belle Zaïda" cast the horoscope, foretold future events, and held her celebrated *séances* of palmistry every day from two o'clock till six. "Private *séances* from nine till eleven every evening. Address for appointments Madame Bertin, No. 35, Boulevard Haussmann."

Before Walter Drake, whose French, like that of most young University men, was only strong enough to enable him to get at the sense of a popular novel, had puzzled out the meaning of the advertisement, he was alone on the balcony. As he put the scrap of paper into his pocket in a tumult of passionate excitement, he heard the voices of Miss Halliday and his sister welcoming the two young Frenchmen.

He slipped through the open window of his bedroom, and remained there until the outer door of the flat closed, shutting out the merry voices of the party.

## CHAPTER II.

IT was six o'clock. Walter Drake stole out upon the balcony with a guilty tread, threw himself into Miss Halliday's deck-chair with his back to the zinc partition, and dived down into the pool of circumstance in which he found himself engulfed. He was in love: he was found out. That was the sum of it.

He hated Miss Halliday for her warning: he despised himself for not heeding it. For in spite of the tell-tale advertisement in his pocket, in spite of Miss Halliday and common-sense, he persisted in a stubborn, stolid, English, fact-defying belief that this unknown woman to whom he had never even spoken, whom he had meanly watched in secret, and who had not so much as seen his face, was the pure, innocent girl he had chosen to set upon a pinnacle of dreams. Even now his heart was beating tenfold faster because he knew the moment was approaching when,

punctual as a clockwork figure, she would come out upon her balcony. A hateful thought struck him: the hours at which she came out, always ten minutes past six in the evening and ten minutes past eleven at night, chimed in uncomfortably with the hours named, in that wretched advertisement, for the closing of the *séances*.

He started in his chair, and the cigar he had lighted dropped from his fingers into the street below. The light sound of a window being opened wider, the rustle of a curtain, then a heavy sigh. Walter Drake knew that his unknown goddess was out upon her balcony. But he would not move. Besides the fact that Miss Halliday's discoveries had made him feel thoroughly ashamed of himself and his secret spying on his beautiful neighbor, there suddenly rose up in his mind an unpleasant remembrance. On the previous night, when he was taking advantage of the hole in the zinc wall to indulge in a last look at his divinity as she retired indoors, this partition had given way at the top, and had partly fallen down. Although this accident had not occurred without making some noise, the lady had gone indoors without even turning her head in his direction. This fact, which had seemed strange to him at the time, now suggested that she had been all the time conscious of his pres-

ence. The next moment he blamed himself for daring to entertain such a notion. The sound of another sigh reached his ears ; another, and then he heard suppressed sobs.

Moved, in spite of all his efforts at self-restraint, he started up, and his chair creaked loudly. Yet, notwithstanding this unmistakable betrayal of the fact that she had a listener, the unknown one sobbed again, if anything more audibly than before.

Hot with shame at the thought that he had been duped into taking for an innocent girl a woman of whom at least it must be said that she was an experienced coquette, Walter Drake turned to go indoors. But he was too much in love, in spite of his new suspicions, to be altogether wise. Another sigh made him hesitate : another smothered sob, and he turned back on to the balcony, and then moved, not quite sure yet whether he did so with his will or against it, towards the partition.

Once there, the next step was inevitable ; he looked through at his interesting neighbor.

There is here and there in the world a rare woman whose appearance almost absolves men from the charge of folly if they fall in love with her at first sight. "La Belle Zaïda" was one of these. Rather tall, very slender, very fair, with

a bloodless face from which the roses of early youth had fled too soon, hair too pale to be called golden, eyes with scarcely enough color to be called blue, she had an expression of face so irresistibly plaintive that the eye was arrested at once. A few more glances into the innocent-looking wide-open eyes, at the sweet mouth, and a man felt his heart moved in spite of himself without a word from her. She was dressed in a plain gown of some colorless stuff, not the dress of an adventuress, Walter told himself emphatically, as all his newly formed prejudices gave way with a rush at sight of her tears. For she was crying, really crying; her pretty pale face was flushed and wet, her eyes were swollen and blurred, her lips were trembling.

Walter's heart leapt up. He had been sure before that she was unhappy; with this confirmation of his belief came a passionate wish to console her. The sunlight, which was still bright, struck full upon her face and showed him that she was even younger than he had supposed, certainly not more than eighteen. An irresistible impulse impelled him to speak to her. All sorts of wild, romantic ideas about the girl were starting up in his mind, and among them such a fixed belief that she was English that, without hesitation or doubt, he addressed her in his native language.

“I—I—beg your pardon,” he stammered out, “I—I hope you’ll forgive my daring to speak to you. But—but—I am sure you are—that is, you have—I am afraid you are unhappy. And—and—I can’t bear to see it.”

Good heavens! Could he have made a more idiotic mess of it than he had done? He was ready to cut his tongue out. If he must obtrude his uncalled-for sympathy upon her, surely, surely, the English language afforded better words than those!

But the lady took no notice. She went on sighing and sobbing as if Walter Drake had made his foolish, incoherent speeches at the other end of the world. Could it be that her sighs and her sobs, which were indeed singularly loud for such a refined-looking girl to utter, had filled her own ears so effectually as to drown her neighbor’s voice? But as Walter asked himself this question, the sallow, thin-faced man whose appearance he had discussed with Miss Halliday appeared at one of the further windows, and muttered a few words in a language Walter did not understand, accompanying them with an impatient stamp of the foot.

Low as his voice was, the girl turned at once, checked her sobs, and with a little quick bend of the head, retired into the room from which she

had come out. The man, with a curious glance, looked straight at the zinc partition, and Walter guessed that the unprepossessing stranger had overheard his own foolish words.

The young doctor's heart was on fire. This fellow had spoken to the girl in the tone he would have used to a dog. Unable to trust his own discretion, as he felt rather than heard the other man's steps coming along the adjoining balcony, Walter retreated into the *salon*.

He could not remain indoors; excited, disturbed, restless, after a few minutes spent in the tiny drawing-room, which he found too small to walk about in, he snatched up his hat and left the flat, slamming the outer door behind him. As he did this, he noticed that the door of the flat opposite was opened a couple of inches or so, and he caught sight of a pair of flashing black eyes in the aperture. They were those of Monsieur "Bertin," he felt sure. Walter stopped short. If the dark-skinned foreigner had anything to say to him, he could come out and say it; he should not think his young neighbor was running away. But M. Bertin neither came out nor went in; and after a few moments spent in pretending to read a letter, Walter went slowly downstairs and strolled towards the Boulevart des Italiens. Once, on the way there, he thought he

caught sight of his doubtful-looking neighbor. Walter was glancing back at a couple of the picturesquely dressed Orientals who, during the Exhibition year, were such a common sight in Paris. Not far behind, dressed in a tightly-fitting frock-coat, was a slim figure which he took for that of M. Bertin.

“Can he be following me?” thought Walter.

This question was soon answered. The young Englishman sat down in front of one of the *cafés* on the Boulevarts, and having ordered a cup of coffee, amused himself by watching the motley crowd, of all nationalities, that passed and re-passed, like a swarm of bright-winged insects flitting in the light of the setting sun after the heat of a July day.

But Walter scarcely saw the crowd, scarcely heard the hum of gay talk around him. He was under the spell of a woman’s sweet face ; and the struggles he was vainly making to believe her a designing coquette only served to drive more firmly into his mind the impression made by her plaintive eyes. Who was she ? What was the relationship between her and the sallow, furtive-eyed man who had spoken to her as if she had been a dog ? Was it to an ill-used wife, to a dupe, a servant, or a slave that Walter had addressed his incoherent words of sympathy ?

He was asking himself these questions when a waiter, who was with difficulty threading his way among the compact mass of customers seated at the little round tables, accidentally brushed against his arm, causing him to look round.

There, two crowded tables between him and Walter, sat the sallow Bertin, with his eyes fixed unmistakably upon the young Englishman.

Not being deficient in his countrymen's power of keeping a stolidly unmoved countenance, Walter Drake let his glance pass over the man as if without recognition. But in truth he felt by no means so tranquil as he looked. He could not doubt that Monsieur Bertin, having overheard his words to the young lady without being able to see who it was that uttered them, had watched for him at the door of his flat, followed him, and was now still engaged in tracking him down. In Paris at this time, where at every corner you might come suddenly face to face with a dark-skinned Arab, his furtive eyes gleaming with a sombre fire, or a Turk, casting glances of languid sensuality from beneath his scarlet fez, it was not difficult to conceive what the far-famed Oriental jealousy might be like, how fierce in its manifestations, how relentless in its pursuit of revenge. It was fear, then, of this man which had caused the beautiful girl to pretend

she had not even heard her neighbor's incoherent words of sympathy. This idea, while at first it flattered Walter Drake's self-love, quickly caused his cheeks to flush with fear lest his ill-advised daring should be visited on the helpless girl. The humming, sauntering throng danced before his eyes, a blurred, confused picture against the sky, reddened by the setting sun. What should he do? What could he do? He was paralyzed, helpless. No interference on his side was possible in the affairs of a woman who had never so much as spoken to or looked at him.

A hand laid lightly on his arm made him start. He turned; and there at his elbow stood, with a deprecating smile, M. Bertin. The crowd was so great, the customers who sat in front of the *café* were jammed so closely together, that it was with difficulty that he made a deferential little bow as he introduced himself, and addressed Walter in excellent English.

“I beg your pardon, sir. Forgive me for having to introduce myself. But I believe that we are neighbors.”

Nothing could have been more courteous, more obsequious even, than the man's manner. But Walter felt cold from head to foot, and watched him keenly. This civility could be but a blind, assumed to put him off his guard, he felt sure.

M. Bertin's right hand was thrust into the breast of his frock-coat. It flashed into Walter's mind that it was a revolver he was holding there, and the Englishman held himself ready for a spring, for a struggle. M. Bertin went on in the same courteous tone.

"My wife and I, monsieur, like to be on good terms with our neighbors, and we should be delighted if you would honor us with a call. The evening is the best time. This little note will explain."

Walter sat in a state of stupefaction as the man suddenly drew forth his hand and placed on the marble-topped table an undirected envelope. Then, with a bow as deep as the cramping circumstances allowed, he withdrew, edging his way among the *café* customers as neatly as a knife-blade.

Walter did not look after him, did not open the note on the table. Two words of the obsequious stranger's rang in his ears, filling him, passionate young idiot that he was, with a frenzy of disappointment, of despair —

"My wife!"

### CHAPTER III.

IF it had not come within the experience of most of us to find, here and there, a genuine and lasting attachment starting upon no firmer ground than admiration for a pretty face, the passionate misery with which Walter Drake learned, as he supposed, that the object of his admiration was a married woman would seem inconceivable. Not until that moment had he known how strong his absurd infatuation was. He stared at the envelope the man had left lying upon the table beside his coffee-cup, but without attempting to open it. Indeed, he scarcely saw it. The mournful white face of the woman, with the tears on her cheeks, rose in his mind side by side with the sinister countenance of the man who had just left him. Here in this crowd, all busy with their own pleasure, and chattering gayly in tongues which sounded in his foreign ears a mere jargon, he felt himself truly alone, and gave himself up to his imaginings without hindrance.

Suddenly, however, his musings were interrupted by a voice speaking to him in bad French, with the unmistakable accent of a fellow-countryman.

“Pardon, monsieur. Est ce que je puis m’asseoir à votre table?”

Walter gathered, as he glanced up and saw a sunburnt young Englishman who was entirely unknown to him, that the stranger wished to take one of the two chairs just vacated by a portly French citizen and his still portlier wife.

“Oui,” said he, briefly; and then waking suddenly to the absurdity of two Englishmen with an extremely limited command of French addressing each other laboriously in that language, he added deliberately: “That is — yes, certainly.”

The stranger, who for some reason looked self-conscious and uncomfortable, reddened, and laughed awkwardly as he sat down. But he evidently wished to continue the conversation, in spite of Walter’s equally evident wish to have no more of it.

“One doesn’t like, in France, to take it for granted that a man’s an Englishman, although I — well, I guessed you were a fellow-countryman,” said the new-comer, who could not have been more than three-and-twenty.

“Why not?” said Walter, aggressively. “I shouldn’t think it much of a compliment to be taken for a Frenchman.”

For, unhappily, the young doctor was not free from a touch of insular jingoism.

“Of course not,” assented the other naturally enough.

Having ordered an *absinthe* under the impression that it was quite “the right thing,” and without the slightest suspicion that it was the social equivalent to “two-penn’orth of gin” in England, the new-comer glanced, as the waiter took away Walter Drake’s empty coffee-cup, at the unopened envelope which the action disclosed. He reddened still more than before, and cleared his throat tentatively; then, without further warning, he rushed at the subject which had evidently been occupying his mind.

“I know the man who put that down,” he burst out.

Walter looked up quickly, not well pleased at finding that he had had a second close observer of his actions during the past ten minutes. The young man, who refrained from meeting his angry eyes, went on quickly—

“He’s a sort of quack, a spiritualist and teller of fortunes, and adventurer, you know, who makes money just any way he can—not

at all a—a ‘desirable acquaintance,’ as ladies say.”

“I daresay,” said Walter, briefly.

The young man began to look more uncomfortable than ever. If there had been a vacant chair anywhere near he would promptly have changed his seat. But there was not. So he plucked up his courage and dashed on—

“I—I hope you don’t think it impertinent of me, being a stranger. Of course in England one wouldn’t interfere even if one thought a man was going to be murdered, unless one knew him. But over here——”

The two young men looked at each other, and then, recognizing the absurd truth of what the other was saying, Walter allowed himself a rather grim smile.

“Quite true,” he said with a nod. “Over here one may allow oneself a little kindness towards even a stranger. So you know this man, Bertin, as he calls himself?”

“Well, I—I have a friend who knows him—to his cost, I may say. This Bertin—Dr. Peters I believe he calls himself in England, but I daresay he has a fresh name for every country in the world—got an introduction to—to my friend, and invited him to attend *séances*, as he called them, in his rooms.

And — and there was a beautiful woman there — ”

Here the young man betrayed clearly, by his evident embarrassment, that his “ friend ” was no other than himself. Walter, on his side, grew crimson, and listened guiltily but with eager attention.

“ Of course,” continued the young fellow with an effort, after a short pause, “ these adventurers always have a pretty woman to help them. You see, a man is so much more of — of a fool when there’s a pretty woman about.”

Walter only nodded. The other went on —

“ And — and it really was awfully hard to believe that there could be anything wrong about her. In fact, even now I shouldn’t like to think there was.” Walter’s eyes met his furtively ; there was a look of positive gratitude in those of the young doctor. “ For there was something more than prettiness about her, something that touched one, and made one feel as if one couldn’t hurt her, whatever she did — ”

“ Is she his wife ? ” interrupted Walter abruptly.

“ I don’t know. There’s an older woman belonging to the establishment, who calls herself Madame Bertin, but — ”

But Walter was satisfied, the wish being father to the thought.

“The poor girl is a dupe herself, most likely,” he said. “Is she English?”

“Oh no; I thought she was, but she didn’t understand a word I said.”

Conscious of having betrayed himself, he began to stammer, and broke off.

“Not French, surely?” said Walter, taking no notice of his confusion.

“I think so. At least the man always spoke to her in French.”

“And couldn’t you tell from the way she answered?”

“She didn’t answer. That is where the trickery comes in. She is made to seem a sort of sphinx, do you see? Interesting because you can get nothing out of her.”

An exclamation of vexation, of disgust, escaped Walter’s lips.

“All the work is given to her. The man is very clever, and she doesn’t make her appearances in public too cheap. But whenever she leaves the house she ensnares a victim, whether consciously or not I don’t pretend to say.” Walter stared down at the table, feeling hot and uncomfortable, while the other went on: “Then the man steps in. He shadows the victim for a little while, finds out with his eyes or his ears whether he is to be trusted. Then, if he is satisfied, he

introduces himself, gives his little insinuating card, and interest and curiosity never fail to bring down their man."

He paused. Walter broke in, his voice scarcely under control —

"Well, and then — this girl — ”

"Oh, her part remains as passive as ever. She pretends to tell your fortune, which the man interprets. You can't help being interested and amused, perhaps fascinated. He makes himself agreeable, and either plays cards with you or borrows money of you. Of course it comes to the same thing. And that goes on till you are tired of it; or till you have spent all your ready money, in which case of course you are dropped."

There was a pause. Walter still stared at the table; and the other young Englishman, becoming abruptly overwhelmed with remorse or false shame, suddenly started up and began to edge his way through the crowd.

"I thought I'd better tell you. Good-evening."

He raised his hat as he shot out these words. Walter, rising too, detained him for an instant.

"I am very much obliged to you," he said nervously. "Tell me one thing more, please. Why hasn't he been prosecuted?"

"Why — why," stammered the other in con-

fusion, “one can’t exactly do it — with that girl about. One hasn’t the heart.”

Walter raised his hat in his turn, and asked no more. He had a long walk by himself right through the city to old Paris, through the Faubourg St. Germain, and back by the Pont Neuf.

By the time he got back to his sister’s flat he was able to tell himself that he took a right view of it all, and that he was cured.

## CHAPTER IV.

It really looked as if Walter Drake was gifted with good sense beyond his years, and had quite got the better of his infatuation of the eyes for the mysterious and dangerous beauty. He never went on to the balcony except during the hours named in M. Bertin's advertisement, and on the card he had found in the adventurer's envelope, as those during which the *séances* for palmistry, etc., were going on. If, when he was outside, he heard a noise on the other side of the zinc partition, he promptly retreated indoors. In fact, he was a model of discretion.

Clever Miss Halliday, who made no more sign of knowing anything about the business than if there had been no such creatures in the world as M. Bertin and his mysterious beauty, watched, admired, and wondered how long it would last.

It lasted about ten days.

At the end of that time Walter, whom ill-

starred love had rendered misanthropical, again gave up his place on some party of pleasure to a friend of his sister's, and, as before, filled up the time with a stroll on the boulevarts. When he got back to No. 35, it was seven o'clock.

There was a small lift, with room for two or three persons, which the occupants of the house worked themselves. Just as Walter entered the court-yard, he saw through the glass door a lady at the door of the lift.

It was the mysterious beauty.

He hurried forward two or three steps, his passion, which he had supposed dead, flaming suddenly up within him to fierce life. Then he struggled with himself, and stopped. No ; if he were to yield to his impulse, go forward, and offer to work the lift, and to stand by her side for only those few moments, he knew that all the work of the last ten days would be undone ; he would be at M. Bertin's mercy. So by a great effort he turned his back upon inclination, and returned to the boulevarts. Then he noticed for the first time a *fiacre* which had been standing outside, and which was just driving off. No doubt it had brought the young lady back home.

Walter could not get the better of the excitement into which he had been thrown by that one glimpse of the girl's slender figure, of the fair

head surmounted by a large black hat, of the small black-gloved hand on the lift-door. After a short, sharp walk instead of the lazy stroll he had intended, he went back to the house, telling himself that he was in no mood for sauntering ; he wanted a book. But down in the depths of his heart he knew that it was the neighborhood of the beautiful girl which was tempting him. He went up in the lift, with a fanciful idea in his mind that the perfume of her long gloves hung about it : the notion intoxicated him. As he sprang out on the fourth floor a sort of stupefaction seized him.

There, pacing the landing in front of the outer door of M. Bertin's flat, was the girl herself. She did not condescend to turn her head as the lift-door slammed to, she did not even glance at the impetuous young man who was standing in the shadow a few yards from her, but continued to pace up and down impatiently, pulling the bell from time to time, but always without getting it answered. Walter stood for a few moments like an idiot, not wishing, hardly daring to come forward. He saw what had happened. Nobody was at home ; she had no key ; she would have to wait for the return of somebody who had one.

Walter, as he looked at her with a loudly-

beating heart, thought he had never seen any creature so attractive, so alluring, so calculated, in every detail of her pale, plaintive beauty, of her simple, daintily-fresh muslin dress, to fascinate a man to the point of enslavement.

It seemed to him a long time, though in fact it was only a few seconds, before he felt able to speak with a steady voice. Then he came forward and met her face to face, at a distance of a couple of yards. He raised his hat, and, glancing at her door, addressed her, blushing furiously.

“I am afraid, madam, that you find yourself locked out. May I get a key, and try to unlock your door for you?”

She gave him a faint smile, as she shook her head. Evidently she did not understand the words, though she seemed to have some idea of his meaning. The smile, the modest flush which came into her pale face as he spoke, made her more charming than ever to Walter. Adventuress? He would have staked his life she was not.

He rang the bell of his sister’s flat, and asked the servant who opened it, a young English girl, to give him some keys. When he had collected some half-dozen, he ran out on to the landing, and tried them, one after the other, in M. Bertin’s lock; while the young lady, as silent as ever, but

smiling prettily, stood watching the burglarious attempt.

Not a key would fit! The lady shrugged her pretty shoulders. Walter, for a moment, stood irresolute. Then, blushing more furiously than ever, he intimated to her by pantomime that he hoped she would consent to wait in his sister's flat until the return of her friends. As soon as, by running backwards and forwards and making gestures of invitation, he had made her understand, he was surprised and almost puzzled by the readiness with which she accepted the suggestion.

But he interpreted this willingness in all sorts of favorable and flattering ways. She knew that two ladies lived there; she was too young to be anything but daringly innocent and indiscreet; she saw that Walter was a gentleman, upon whose chivalry she could rely. So the infatuated young man told himself, as the beautiful girl walked like a princess through the tiny vestibule, where the stained glass of the little windows threw soft lights upon her white dress, into the *salon* beyond.

He placed a chair for her, a low chair which Miss Halliday much affected, as it showed off a handsome dress to perfection. But no soft silk, no gorgeous brocade, ever looked so exquisite in

Walter's eyes as the folds of crumpled muslin which fell about the fair-haired girl who now occupied this seat. There was nothing fidgety or confused about her ; she sat back with her eyes full of their habitual grave sadness, and looked at the flowers, the pictures, with bright, interested glances. Knowing it was impossible to entertain her by speech, Walter brought her photographs and books with pictures, and sat reverently near her, so much intoxicated by the vicinity that he feared she would be puzzled or alarmed by the sound of his rapid, excited breathing.

But she remained unmoved as a child. Only once did she utter a few words, and then they came so suddenly as to give her companion almost a shock. He was showing her a large photograph of a wooded hill in Surrey. She took it from him, nodding and smiling at the picture.

“ P’itty, p’itty, oh, so p’itty ! ” she cried in a soft voice, with a tone of loving admiration.

The words were like a child’s. Walter, delighted to find that she knew a little, if a very little, English, burst out into questions, comments. But she raised her head, looked at him almost vacantly, blushed, shook her head, and turned again to the photograph.

Was she—was she weak of intellect? The thought went like a stab through Walter's mind, to be at once thrust out. There was bright intelligence in the girl's every glance, besides sweetness and tenderness unspeakable: all waiting for the happy fellow who—

Walter rose from his chair, feeling that he was losing what head he had. He rang for coffee and fruit, and watched and waited on his guest with reverent devotion which seemed to touch her. For the seriousness of her face broke up, and gave place to more and more frequent smiles. The change made him deliriously happy. She got up presently, and looked at the ornaments about the little *salon*, and signified with graceful gestures what she thought of them. She stopped before a portrait of Miss Halliday, evidently recognizing it, and smiled from it to him with a little demure suggestion that he took a special interest in the sitter.

Walter stamped his foot and shook his head emphatically.

“No, no, no,” he said.

And the girl glanced at him askance, and perhaps saw more meaning in his eyes than even in his gestures. She put down the portrait hurriedly, and crossed the room to the door. He understood, and feeling as if he was closing

the gates of Paradise upon himself, he went humbly to the door, and let her out.

On the landing she turned hesitatingly towards him and, with the first sign of shyness she had shown, gave him her hand. He dared not kiss it, he scarcely dared to press it; he only held it for two seconds in his, and let her withdraw it as she turned to her own door.

He waited at his own while she rang. The bell was answered at once this time. It was M. Bertin himself who opened the door. He was full of apparently anxious inquiries, of excuses for their having all been out so long; but Walter, with a tightening of the heart, caught a glance in his direction which flashed into his mind the suggestion that he had been tricked.

By the man, by the scoundrel of a man, of course!

As for the girl, she passed in without a word.

## CHAPTER V.

WHEN Walter returned to his sister's *salon* he felt that the world had become transfigured. This room, still sanctified by the aroma of the girl's presence, seemed to him so full of light and joy, and the majesty and mystery of gracious womanhood, that merely to stand where she had stood, to hang over the chair in which she had sat, was pure and unalloyed delight. As for the photograph of the Surrey hills, which she had held in her hand, and which had drawn from her that strange, childish exclamation, he took it out of the portfolio which contained it among a number of others, and hid it in his own room. For by this time he had given himself up to the passion which possessed him, and held lawful all means of keeping imaginary communion with her. *She* the wife of that mean-faced quack? No, no, not if all the priests and lawyers in France should swear it.

This state of exaltation, varied certainly by occasional qualms of doubt and common sense, lasted until the ladies came back. They had been out to dinner and to the theatre afterwards, and when Walter met them in the *salon*, they were both very tired, and Mrs. Plunket was rather cross. A communication the housemaid had just made to her was the text of her discourse to her brother when he entered. Miss Halliday was sitting on the chair he held sacred: this enraged him.

“I really think, Walter,” began his sister, “that you might have more sense of what is due to me— to us, than to bring unknown ladies into the place during our absence!”

Mrs. Plunket would not have let the incident reach Ernestine’s ears if she could have helped it; but as the maid had informed her of the visit in Miss Halliday’s hearing, there was nothing for it but to thresh the matter out, and trust that he would have some fair excuse to give for his extraordinary conduct.

Walter was surprised to find how coolly he could answer her. The entrance of these ladies had indeed dragged him down with a rush from the clouds to the ordinary realities of life. He laughed quite easily.

“There was only one unknown lady, and she

is a very near neighbor," he said. "I don't know her name, and as she is neither French nor English I couldn't even talk to her. But finding her on the landing outside, where she had to wait till some other member of the household came back to let her in, I thought it the only right thing to do to ask her to wait in here."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Plunket, wishing he had not been so elaborate over his explanation, but feeling that there was not much more to be said.

Miss Halliday said nothing. Walter devoutly hoped she would not, when alone with his sister, volunteer any information concerning M. Bertin's establishment.

He did the lady injustice.

"Where are you going?" asked Miss Halliday next day after luncheon, meeting Walter in the hall just as he was taking up his hat and gloves.

He had avoided any *tête-à-tête* with Ernestine that morning, having an uneasy suspicion that the lady guessed shrewdly at this state of feeling. He knew by this time that she could have given no hint concerning the occupations of the Bertin establishment to his sister, and he therefore did her the small justice of being defiantly frank.

"I'm going next door."

They exchanged looks, of vexation and warn-

ing on the one side, of uneasy but stubborn resolution on the other.

“ You won’t be warned ? ”

“ Yes, I will. But with the warning in my mind, I must judge for myself.”

He went out, and Ernestine shook her head.

“ He’ll not be in a state to judge of anything soon,” she thought to herself. “ What a silly lad it is ! ”

She had a very soft place in her heart for the silly lad, though, and she felt distinctly sore that he should not be able to rise above the common masculine failing of preferring a pair of young blue eyes, belonging to a mind which was a blank to him, to a pair which had looked out long enough on the world to make the fancy of their owner for himself an extremely flattering one.

Walter, meanwhile, had rung M. Bertin’s bell, and been ushered in by a man in livery, who conducted him into a tiny *salon*, furnished in the light, pretty French fashion, where an elderly Frenchwoman, who introduced herself to him as “ Madame Bertin,” was dispensing tea, “ *a l’anglaise*,” as she explained, in tiny cups to half-a-dozen lady visitors.

The bright sunlight was so effectually kept out by dark-red blinds and half-drawn curtains, that at first Walter’s blinded eyes could make out no

detail of Madame Bertin's personal appearance beyond the fact that she was stout. When his eyes got used to the dark-red light he found that there was nothing more salient about her. She was just a middle-aged Frenchwoman, a mere bundle of dowdy garments, with hawk-like eyes and thin, compressed lips.

For be it noted that a Frenchwoman worthy of the name is never middle-aged: she carries on her youth till an abnormally late period, and then, when she is tired of attracting admirers, drops suddenly into a stately and charming old age.

After a very few minutes, during which the ladies chatted of palmistry and second-sight with the conviction of profound believers, a portière at the end of the room was drawn aside, and the man-servant, re-appearing, announced that Mademoiselle Zaïda was at liberty to receive more guests.

Like a flock of elderly and portly doves the ladies rose and passed behind the portière, Walter discreetly following them.

The room into which he now passed was longer than the first, and the daylight was altogether excluded. It was so crowded with little spindle-legged gilt chairs and sofas that there was no room left for any other furniture than long mirrors reaching to the floor and little quaint

cabinets in the corners. Just inside, and in view, as Walter noted, of Madame Bertin's sharp eyes, the man-servant stood, holding a salver containing a goodly number of gold pieces and two or three English bank-notes conspicuously displayed. On this salver the visitors dropped their offerings; and Walter, glancing back as he reluctantly parted with a sovereign, saw that Madame Bertin had risen from her chair, and, eyeglass in hand, was jotting down on a pocket-tablet what he doubted not were the financial results of this collection.

When all had passed into the room, the portière was drawn again, and the man-servant retired. The ladies fluttered down on to chairs, or stood amiably arranging the order of precedence. Quite half the number were evidently acquaintances, and belonged to the class of the rich *bourgeoisie*, the women of which thankfully rush into the silly little underhand dissipations of fortune-telling and spirit-rapping to escape from the monotony of their idle lives.

After a few moments, the light, tinkling sound of a mandolin was heard in an adjoining room, and almost at the same time the folding-doors which shut in an alcove at the end of the apartment were opened, and M. Bertin came out, throwing them wide open as he did so.

Excited and indignant and passionately moved as he was, at the sight of the girl he loved, whom this action suddenly revealed, Walter could not but be struck by the theatrical effectiveness of her environment.

The alcove was hung with crimson plush, and a church-lamp, hanging by chains from the ceiling, showed a soft light over her fair head. She was standing by a small table with a handsomely embroidered cover, white, grave, listless, with her eyes fixed on the open page of a book which she reluctantly closed as the alcove doors were thrown open. She wore a long plain white silk gown with loose undersleeves, and over it a magnificent over-dress of brocade of a large and striking pattern, the long, hanging sleeves of which nearly touched the ground. The picture she made, with her pale face and fair hair, was most striking. But to see her in these theatrical surroundings, instead of disillusionizing Walter, filled him with a passionate desire to carry her away from them into a purer atmosphere, a more dignified life.

The palmistry *séance* had begun. Taking in hers the hand of the lady who first came forward, the girl examined the lines with painstaking, business-like minuteness, and made notes of her observations, as she went on, with a pencil and

slate which lay on the table beside her. All without a word. This perpetual silence of hers struck Walter as the most effective part of the entire proceedings: it was sphinx-like, piquant, original. Her notes were copied carefully on a sheet of paper by M. Bertin, as fast as she wrote them down. This paper was then folded, sealed by him with much ceremony, and handed to the visitor, who withdrew, passing by a side-door into the vestibule, where the man-servant was waiting to open the outer door.

Walter awaited his turn, keeping in the background as much as he could. From time to time the tinkle of the outer bell announced a fresh arrival, and presently another batch of visitors came from behind the portière. There were two men among the new-comers, a fact which filled Walter with a frenzy of jealousy. And then, noticing that the mandolin only tinkled between the entrance of a batch of visitors and the arrival of a new-comer in the tea-room, Walter had the audacity, seizing a moment when M. Bertin's sharp eyes were busy over his notes, to peep behind the portière. There he saw that it was the portly Madame Bertin, whose unflagging industry he could not but admire, who filled her idle moments, when she was left alone, by a business-like twanging on the romantic instru-

ment, which she thrust under the table when the outer bell announced a fresh arrival.

The idea of this plump, prosaic lady filling the silence with the playing of *boleros* roused in Walter an almost uncontrollable impulse to burst out laughing ; but at that moment M. Bertin, whose sharp eyes had long ago singled him out, signalled to him to come forward. As he walked up the room, feeling suddenly as bashful as a schoolboy, and filled with the foolish notion that all these people must see that he adored the girl, her blue-gray eyes met his for the first time.

The change which came suddenly into her face electrified Walter. She was no longer listless, she was no longer sad. He walked on towards her mechanically, not knowing what he did. For the glow on the girl's face, the brightness of her eyes, a tender yearning in her expression which seemed to him to reach to his heart and twine tendrils about it, all brought him a message as unexpected as it was intoxicating. She loved him ; or if not, she was ready to do so.

He suddenly found himself wondering whether he was walking straight, or whether he was giving outward signs, which all might read, of the delicious madness in his veins. As a matter of fact his movements had become heavy, slow,

leaden : a sort of paralysis seemed to deaden his limbs. He reached the table. After a moment's hesitation, a moment during which he felt that he could scarcely bear the touch of her hand without crying aloud, he felt the grasp of her white fingers, and a shiver ran through him.

M. Bertin was observing him ; he could not help that. If he had had to be shot the next minute for this one minute's joy the fact would not have troubled him then. The girl held his hand, bent over it, following the lines of his palm with a slim, pink-nailed finger. Her light hair almost touched his face. He could hear her quick breathing. When, still holding his hand, she took up her pencil and scribbled on the slate, she gave him a glance which thrilled him with longing to seize her head in his arms and hold it against his breast. A shade passed over her face once, and it was with a sigh that she noted down something which her flimsy mock-science told her. Then she drew herself up, and let his hand fall, with one plaintive look straight into his eyes.

Walter scarcely knew how he got away. All that he remembered was that Bertin followed him to the door, and showered upon him polite invitations to drop in, any evening he pleased, to play cards with him.

“But I warn you,” continued the quack, with a smile and a shrug, “not to play with me unless you are a first-rate player, or unless you can afford to lose. For I may say, without boasting, that I am quite *de première force*.”

So Walter found when, on the evening of the following day, having resisted the temptation of going the very same evening, he again visited the Bertins’ flat.

The aspect of the room where the palmistry *séance* had been held was now entirely changed. By the closing of the alcove, the removal of some of the chairs, the introduction of two or three little tables and of a sofa, it was a habitable, even homelike, little apartment. La Belle Zaïda looked to Walter’s eyes lovelier than ever in a dress of ivory-tinted, transparent white stuff. She was bending over an embroidery frame, from which, during the whole of the evening she scarcely looked up. Madame Bertin, ridiculous in a cap of state, stitched away at some fancy-work near her, looking, Walter was glad to think, a very dragon of vigilance.

Not once during the evening did the girl break the silence which added so greatly to the mysterious fascination she exercised. There was no palmistry in the evening, Walter was glad to see. The visitors were all men with the exception of a

couple of ladies of the homely type of Madame Bertin herself, who left their shawls and overshoes in the vestibule, nodded familiarly to La Belle Zaïda, and spent the evening in low-voiced chat with their hostess. The gentlemen played cards with M. Bertin and each other. Everything was supremely decorous, and might have seemed even a trifle dull to Walter but for the presence of the girl.

But the mystery of her nationality increased. Two of the men present were expert linguists, and between them they tried her in a dozen languages without success. The appearance of utter vacancy with which she shook her head and answered “No, no,” in English seemed to Walter to preclude the possibility that she did understand. He himself tried her in English and in French, without result. Yet when either of the Bertins spoke to her, he in English or she in French, she answered with a nod or a smile of apprehension. Madame Bertin’s explanation of this to an inquirer was received with sceptical smiles.

“She is a creature of heavenly gifts,” replied Madame; “she can only hold communion with the souls in sympathy with her.”

The soul, if he had one, of that wretched quack in sympathy with that girl’s! The sug-

gestion, ridiculous as it seemed to him, enraged Walter, who spent an uneasy evening, at one moment supremely happy when the girl's glance rested upon him, at another supremely miserable when she looked at anyone else.

So the evening wore on. When were these enormities of M. Bertin's, this cheating at cards, this borrowing of large sums, to be committed? Walter was impatient to have the man's character revealed as that of a scoundrel, in order that he might at once address himself to the task of freeing the girl from a position which he felt sure was that of dupe. But M. Bertin refused to allow play for any but trifling stakes, saying that his superior skill gave him too great an advantage. Walter saw, and it maddened him to see, that for most of the guests, as for himself, the presence of La Belle Zaïda was the attraction. He could have gnashed his teeth to find that when he left, one young Frenchman, whose admiration for the girl was evident, stayed behind.

One grain of comfort he had, though even that he was not to be permitted to keep. On bidding La Belle Zaïda good-by, he felt that her soft white fingers trembled a moment under the pressure of his; and he saw, or thought he saw, in the modest glance of her eyes, a look of kindness which set his whole heart aglow.

When he let himself with his latch-key into his sister's flat, he came face to face with Miss Halliday, and his face clouded guiltily.

"Amy has gone to bed," she said, "and has left me up to give you some supper."

She led the way into the *salle-à-manger*, and he followed her just to say he wanted nothing to eat.

"Now listen," she said decisively, holding up her finger in kindly warning, "I know you are in love, in spite of all my wholesome admonitions. Now don't you think, before you let your appetite fall off on account of any woman, you should at least be sure that she has a little feeling for you in return? She has other admirers, I take it for granted."

"Yes," admitted Walter with a groan.

"Have you had any distinguishing mark of her favor?"

"I may say 'Yes,'" he said reluctantly, after a pause.

"She pressed your hand in bidding you good-night perhaps, and gave you a look——"

Walter grew crimson, and turned angrily to leave the room. Miss Halliday, in quite a humble voice, spoke again.

"Forgive me for my idle suggestions," she began. "You know——"

He interrupted her impatiently.

“ And what other way has a young girl of showing a liking, a preference, except by looks and pressure of the hand ? ”

“ No other, but — are you sure that you only, of all the men there, got that look, that hand pressure ? ”

Walter could have killed her. With a few words of thanks, which were almost insulting in their coldness, he wished her good-night, and went to his room.

But the bitter sting of that suggestion remained.

Was *he* the dupe after all ?

## CHAPTER VI.

WALTER scarcely slept that night. His head was as much on fire as his heart. At one moment he was full of wild schemes for carrying the girl off, marrying her at the British Embassy, and braving all the possible results of such a remarkably indiscreet proceeding ; the next, doubts as to her good faith rose up in such numbers that they overpowered all the passionate appeals of his love. What could it be but the most transparent charlatanism, this sphinx-like silence, this pretence that she could understand no one but the Bertins ? Although she made them no answer with her lips, it was plain that she understood what they said, whether they spoke in French or in English. Again, she had uttered a few words in a sort of child's broken English when she was alone with him in his sister's *salon*. If he could see her alone again, he wondered whether he could get her to speak to him, or whether the

influence over her of these people was too strong.

One resolution Walter made in the silence of the night. He would be present at no more *séances*, no more receptions in the adjoining flat. He could submit to be the dupe of La Belle Zaïda, but not of her unprepossessing guardian.

So the next day passed, and the next, and the next, and Walter did not catch a glimpse of his divinity. But he met M. Bertin on the stairs, and replied to that gentleman's pressing expostulations and invitations by assurances that he was very much obliged, and that he would not forget him.

In the meantime, Walter continued to hear La Belle Zaïda's steps on the adjoining balcony during her free hours ; but, though burning with impatience to look upon her face again, he was mindful of the watchful Miss Halliday, and refrained. On the fourth day of this abstention, however, he got desperate ; and finding himself in a box at the *Français* with his sister and Ernestine, surrounded by a bevy of young men, all eager to take his place beside the rich American lady, he slipped away, and drove back home.

It was a quarter to nine o'clock. The detestable evening receptions, when M. Bertin's friends

trooped in, on pretence of playing cards, to gaze at the beautiful Zaïda, began at nine. Walter felt that he would be only just in time to see her on the balcony for a moment.

Would he be in time though? As his *fiacre* drew up before No. 35, a carriage, drawn by an exceedingly handsome pair of chestnut horses, stopped at the same door. Walter knew those horses; they were the talk of Paris just now. They belonged to a rich Peruvian who had come over for the Exhibition, and who was making a sensation by vulgar and ostentatious extravagance. Walter glanced at him as he got out of his carriage. The Peruvian was a little old-young man, with a dark, shrivelled skin, thick lips, and small black eyes, and moved slowly as if the infirmities of old age had come upon him before their time.

Walter got into the lift, and quickly reached his floor, with a flush on his face at the unpleasant thought that the repulsive-looking creature he had just seen might be on his way to M. Bertin's flat. He dashed into his sister's *salon*, and thence out on to the balcony. A sudden tremor seized him here, for he heard by the soft rustle of a woman's dress that La Belle Zaïda was close by. After a moment's hesitation, he stepped up on one of the two big boxes on the

balcony, in each of which a myrtle tree grew, and looked over the zinc partition.

The girl — for it was she whom he had heard — started, and a bright-red flush came into her face as she looked up at him. At the same moment she impulsively held out her hand.

“No trickery there, no acting!” thought Walter triumphantly, as, unable to restrain himself in his surprise and exultation, he held her hand pressed against his lips while his passionate eyes rested, in a devouring ecstasy, on her face.

The girl trembled, tried at first to withdraw her hand, and then, with an irresistible expression, half shy pleading to be set free, half a most maidenly submission, she stood still, and let him whisper incoherent words of love. But only for a few moments. Suddenly she started, and looked behind her, at the same moment withdrawing her hand from Walter’s. Then, turning quickly to the young man, she signed to him to go away, putting her finger silently on her lips in token of caution. Walter had heard nothing, and he marvelled at the acuteness of the girl’s hearing, when he saw that M. Bertin had stepped out on to the balcony.

“Come, come,” the latter said sharply to the girl, in the same arrogant tone that Walter had heard him use to her before.

The young Englishman's blood boiled. If he had been in love before, without encouragement, what was he now that she had listened to him, let him press her fingers against his lips, heard him whisper that he loved her ! The word doubt no longer existed for him. His thoughts flew onward, onward along the path of events which he had marked out : his proposal of marriage to her ; her acceptance, according most graciously and sweetly the privileges love could claim ; his formal interview with the Bertins, her ostensible guardians ; and, lastly, the crowning of his hopes in marriage. And then there burst in upon these intoxicating dreams certain hard unpleasant realities, whereof the first and the chief was the supposed visit of the rich Peruvian. He could not bear the thought of the girl he loved being exposed to the gaze, if not to the attentions, of such a notorious libertine as Don Muniz.

At last his passionate jealousy got the better of his distaste to seeing her in the company of Bertin's acquaintances, and he went again to the adjacent flat. It was as he had feared : the Peruvian was there, and was evidently captivated by Zaïda's strange pale beauty. M. Bertin, too, who played *écarté* first with one guest and then with another, and who found a difficulty in restraining the Peruvian's impatience at the small-

ness of the stakes he allowed, was less cordial to Walter himself, and did not repeat his invitation to “drop in whenever he pleased!” It was evident that his bright black eyes, which shone to-night with a more eager brilliancy than usual, noted every glance which Don Muniz cast at Zaïda, and noted also the irritation of the young Englishman.

When the rest of the guests left, according to custom, at eleven o’clock, Don Muniz stayed on. And it was not until half an hour later that Walter, smoking cigar after cigar impatiently in the courtyard below, saw the little miserable caricature of a man, with his halting gait and small shrunken face, come out of the house and get up into his carriage.

Mrs. Plunket and Miss Halliday had returned a few minutes before. With his heart beating very fast, Walter returned to his sister’s flat, where he did his best to entertain the ladies until they retired for the night.

All the time, however, that he was laughing and talking with them, he had an uneasy sense that Miss Halliday saw through his assumed gayety to the disquieting emotions underneath.

When the ladies were in their own rooms, he went to the open window of his, and listened eagerly for some sound on the adjoining balcony.

It was nearly always Zaïda's custom on fine nights to stand for a few moments drinking in the fresh air, after her escape from the heated *salon*. He had not to wait long. His heart beat furiously as he heard the soft sigh which told him she was near. What should he do? He was burning to speak to her, to burst out in denunciation of Don Muniz; to ask her when he could see her again, to tell her that he had lived through days of miserable suspense and longing in the hour which had passed since he left M. Bertin's. But he dared not address her at this time of night, even if, to do so, he had not had to pass before Miss Halliday's window.

One thing he might venture to do, he desperately thought. Seizing a sheet of paper and a pencil, he wrote a few ardent words, telling her, with a marked lack of literary style and finish, that he loved her, he adored her, and imploring her to try to love him in return. Then he stepped out very softly, and reaching the partition almost without making a sound, he put the roll of paper through the hole he had made in the sheet of zinc.

To his rapturous delight, the note was seized, snatched at once, and in a moment the girl was gone.

He heard the soft flutter of her dress, the light

footfall, the closing of her window. He went back to his own room in a sort of delirium. It did indeed cross his mind that she might not understand his note, for even her nationality was still a mystery to him, the only words he had ever heard her utter having been spoken in the broken English of a foreigner or of a child. But even this consideration did not avail seriously to affect his joy, his triumph. She had taken the note eagerly, she had held it in her hands, perhaps to her lips. Walter Drake had never been much in love before, and his new passion partook of the enthusiasm of the lad as well as of the tenacity of the mature man.

On the following morning Walter went early on to the balcony, in the hope of some sign from Zaïda. He had another note ready, and he had waited very few moments when he heard her on the other side of the partition. Again he folded his love-missive and passed it through the hole in the zinc: again it was seized and carried off, and Zaïda disappeared without having exchanged a word or a look with him. For three or four days he had to be content to vent his feelings in this one-sided correspondence. Zaïda never waited for a look or a word, but always came out, at the hour appointed in his last note, to receive the next one. This looked as if she understood them, therefore

Walter soon became impatient for some more direct sort of answer, and in one of his letters he told her so. If the declaration of his love did not offend her, would she not let him have one word to tell him so: he should be on the balcony the next morning at eleven, but he would not venture to give her another note unless she herself would write a few words to him back.

“I love you,” his letter went on, “too passionately to be content any longer with your silent acceptance of my letters. Let me have half a dozen words only to say that I may hope to win you for my wife. I can scarcely endure this suspense. At one moment the thought that you are so near me, and that your fingers seem to touch my letters eagerly, sets me on fire. The next the idea that you are perhaps only playing with me after all makes me miserable. But this cannot be true. I have heard of love without trust, but I cannot imagine it. I trust you, Zaïda, I do trust you, oh, my darling, and by that trust I beseech you to let me have one word of answer. Only tell me the thought of my love is not distasteful to you, and I will at once go to the Bertins and tell them I want to make you my wife.

“Yours eternally,

“WALTER DRAKE.”

It was late at night; the ladies of the household had retired to their rooms and M. Bertin's reception next door was over. Walter stole out on to the balcony; heard by the soft rustle of a silk frock that Zaïda was there, and passed his letter through to her in the usual manner. He never dared venture upon more than a whisper as he did so, for fear of the ears on each side of them; and even that whisper never got an audible response. That mysterious silence of hers, which had at first made her so interesting, was getting weird, uncanny: Walter would have given the world to have broken it.

He stayed outside for a little while, smoking. He wondered whether, on the following morning, he should get any answer to his letter. If not, he told himself that he would go straight away, either on to Italy or back to England. Zaïda certainly knew enough English to understand what he had written, and she could decide between now and next morning whether she cared to have him or not.

To his astonishment, he had not been ten minutes out there, debating thus with himself, when a little mouse-like scratching noise made him look round, and he saw protruding through the hole he had made in the partition a couple of tightly-rolled sheets of note-paper.

He, in his turn, seized them eagerly. But before he could do more than whisper incoherent thanks and blessings, the figure on the other side slid away, and he was alone with his treasure. He rushed into his room with it. The note was in pencil, written in a dainty lady's hand, but hurriedly. Walter's eyes seemed to burn into his head as he read. The letter had no heading.

"I don't know how to write," it began, "I am too wicked, too much ashamed of myself. I ought never to have received your letters, but I was unhappy and you were kind, and your words comforted me. I said to myself: 'His face is good. I do no harm, surely, in reading what he writes. It amuses him to write, and he thinks I do not understand. In a few days he will go away, and forget the strange foreign girl, and will never know that she is as English as himself.' But you stayed, and stayed, and your letters grew more passionate, and you talked of making me your wife. I cried when I read that. I should have liked to be your wife, oh, I may tell you that. You say you trust me, but you cannot trust me more than I could have trusted you. When I sat in your *salon* with you that day, you thought I occupied myself with nothing but the coffee and the fruit and the pictures. But you were wrong. I studied you. I found out so

much about you, all in a woman's way, by little things and by guessing, and I said to myself: 'This man makes me proud that I am English too.' But you did not know. Oh, no, I took care of that. I was so quiet, you could see nothing. But you loved me all the same. Even now, when I must tell you to go away and never to think of me any more, I am proud and happy because you have loved me. Good-by, good-by, good-by! Do not try to see me again. If I see you, I must tell you of the barrier between us, of that which has made me swear to myself never to become any man's wife. You must not put me to this trial. And you must not speak to the Bertins: they would simply take me away, and I should go with them willingly, for I should know that they were right.

"Do not think, as I see by your letter you do, that I am ill-treated. I am not. I am an orphan, and my uncle, who brought me up, is dead. My aunt has been left almost without money, and she it was who arranged with these people to take me with them, so that I could earn some money with the little accomplishments she taught me. It is my joy and comfort to send her what I can every week, and to know that I am repaying a little the tenderness she has always shown me.

“I implore you to write me no more notes: I ought never to have received one. If you do love me, forgive me, and respect my wish, my prayer. Yours most gratefully,

“MARY OAKLEY.”

## CHAPTER VII.

WALTER DRAKE looked up from the letter like a man awaking from a horrible dream. It read from end to end like a maddening enigma, of which the only portion clear to read was the sadness underlying every sentence. What could the barrier be of which she spoke? That it was some trifle, such as lowliness of birth or want of fortune, he firmly believed, and her sensitiveness in the matter was only another most alluring charm. But even blinded as he was by his passion, he could not help seeing that her story was a strangely improbable one. How could a loving relative and guardian, such as the girl described her aunt to be, allow her to wander about the world with such questionable protectors as the Bertins, earning money to support her by practices of such dubious morality as fortune-telling, palmistry, and the like, for the exercise of which miserable old women were

haled from time to time before the London magistrates?

He did not mean to give her up, that was certain ; but, in the meantime, it was difficult to decide what was the next step to take. It was only too probable that the Bertins would object to his carrying off the chief attraction of their miserable *séances* and receptions ; therefore, mindful of her warning, he did not yet dare address himself to them. So he wrote a letter, imploring her to dismiss from her mind the notion that any obstacle could exist for long between him and her if only she were willing to accept his devotion ; and he begged her, at the same time, to give him the address of her aunt, in order that he might write to her on the subject nearest to his heart.

But this letter was never delivered. Mary, as he now loved to call her to himself, no longer appeared on the balcony. Worse than this, day after day and evening after evening Walter saw the Peruvian's carriage waiting before the house. The young fellow grew daily more restless, more irritable, so that at last his sister perceived that something was wrong with him ; and, suspecting some love-affair, though without guessing its object, she proposed that they should push on to Switzerland.

“We can come back here when this frightful heat is over,” she added.

Miss Halliday agreed cordially with the plan, but Walter was reticent as to his views. The ladies, however, proceeded from suggestion to arrangement without a doubt but that he would end by falling in with their wishes. So that, before they had left the luncheon-table, it was already decided that they should leave two servants in charge of the flat, and start for Switzerland in two days’ time.

Walter remained in the dining-room for the enjoyment of a cigar, while the ladies, still chattering about their plans, went into the *salon*.

Should he go with them, and try to cure himself by absence of the passion which was gnawing at his heart? Or should he decide to stay behind, in obedience to an imaginary call on him to be ready to protect, if necessary, the girl he loved? He called himself a fanciful fool for this last question, which yet remained in his mind. He had almost decided to stay, when the door opened, and Miss Halliday came in. She had grown graver these last few days, Walter thought; had been less ready with her bright-witted remarks upon men and things. He started up and threw the end of his cigar away.

“No, sit down again,” she said imperiously, a

slight shade of annoyance crossing her face. "You know very well that I don't mind smoke ; and it is unsociability, not chivalry, which shuts you up here to have your cigar by yourself."

He sat down, snubbed, and took out another cigar from his case without a word, but he did not light it. This woman had something disagreeable to say — something about Mary Oakley.

"Are you going away with us ?" she asked.

The question was a simple one enough, and it was put very quietly. But if a bomb had been thrown into the flat from the opera-house opposite, it would not have disconcerted Walter more. He was unpleasantly conscious that his confusion was manifest to the too shrewd lady, although he managed to put a return-question without stammering.

"What can have made you think that I was not ?"

"Perhaps," rejoined Ernestine, with a little dry, shy laugh, "the knowledge of what I should do myself if I were a man in the same circumstances."

Walter reddened, and his eyes met hers. There was such an attractive expression of honest, daring sympathy in those of the woman that he came nearer to her, acting upon an instinct which encouraged her to go on.

“I like a man who doesn’t do things by halves,” she said; “even if it results in his not making a fool of himself by halves.”

For a moment Walter was disconcerted again by this frankness. The next instant he threw back his head and burst out laughing.

“Go on,” said he, “go on. I don’t say that I plead guilty yet, but go on.”

“Having fallen in love with a woman whom the most elementary rules of common-sense must tell you to mistrust, you proceed to resolve to marry her — — — ”

Walter looked up, reddening more deeply.

“What put that into your head?”

“Never ask by what process a truth comes into a woman’s head. And I’m not blaming you. Since a man can only have one wife, surely he may please himself over the choice of that one.”

They both laughed, and Walter drew nearer to her. Nothing in the world could have made him in love with Miss Halliday; but he was beginning to think that, short of that supreme mark of appreciation, there was no sign of his favor which he would not be willing to bestow upon her.

“At the same time,” she went on, holding up a warning finger, “it really does seem that you have gone out of your way to find about the

unlikeliest girl possible for a sober Englishman's wife. You have heard of Don Muniz, whose extravagances are the talk of Paris?"

Walter started, assenting with an uneasy movement of the head.

"Do you know that his carriage is always before this door, and that he is spoken of as having become enslaved by some pretty woman?"

"You are too hard. How can you be sure that it is her fault?"

"I am *not!*!" cried Ernestine, with sudden energy. "I have seen this girl. The people she is with take her out now and then, most carefully escorted, and it is impossible not to notice her, for her strange beauty makes such a sensation."

"She is beautiful, is she not?" struck in Walter in a low voice.

"Very beautiful. But — —"

"But what — what?"

"You will be angry with me. Remember, you have asked to know what I think."

"Well?"

"I thought her face looked — as if — there were some faculty of the mind — wanting."

"Do you mean — do you mean — you thought her — —"

He stopped, his voice trembling.

“Mentally deficient or weak? Well, yes. Indeed, how otherwise can you account for her position with these people?”

Walter walked up and down in a miserable agony of doubt raised by the suggestion. He remembered in the girl certain things which seemed to support the terrible notion — a strange vacancy of expression in particular. He turned on Ernestine with passion.

“No, no,” he cried; “it is not so. I have a letter from her —” He stopped, blushing. But as Miss Halliday merely nodded, as if the fact was a matter of course, he soon continued: “she writes as sensibly as you or I.”

“Does she say — forgive the question — nothing which could tally with my unhappy suggestion?”

“She says,” admitted Walter, after a pause, “that she has a secret, and that I am not to think of her.”

Miss Halliday got up restlessly, and began to pick out such of the flowers in the bouquet on the table as seemed to want replacing by fresher ones. “And you don’t mean to mind?”

“Of course not.”

“Very well, then. I shan’t let Amy go away.”

“Why not? Can’t you trust to my discretion if I am left here by myself?”

“ Most assuredly not.”

“ Thank you.”

But Walter was not angry : he could not be, for she was as sympathetic, as much interested, as if the love-affair had been her own. He gave her a look, half of gratitude, half of impatience, as she ran, laughing, out of the room.

That evening he went again to the Bertin reception ; and finding the Peruvian not only in attendance, but lavish in his attentions to the statuesque, silent beauty, Walter showed his irritation a little too plainly, and was informed by his no longer courteous host that this was the last of the evenings on which he could receive guests, as the contract of marriage of his adopted daughter was about to be signed.

“ Marriage ! ” echoed Walter in a loud voice.

He was standing with M. Bertin by the card-table from which they had both risen. His angry, excited tone made Madame Bertin start ; and Don Muniz, who was sitting between the elderly lady and the young one, with his narrow black eyes fixed upon the latter, looked up with a frown. Only the girl herself remained unmoved. She was taking no notice of the Peruvian, but sat with her head bent, listlessly stroking a little Persian kitten she held in her lap.

Walter’s breath came fast as he noticed the

girl's immovability with a sudden spasm of dread.

"I did not know — I had not heard that the young lady was going to be married," he said in a lower tone, with his eyes fixed on the girl's fair head. "And the fortunate husband is ——"

"Señor Muniz."

And Bertin, without glancing at Walter, bowed his head in the direction of the ill-looking Peruvian.

There was nothing to be got by further questioning, and Walter said no more to the quack, who plainly showed his anxiety to be rid of him. The young Englishman, left to himself while Bertin addressed some obsequious phrases to Don Muniz, conceived a little plan, which he instantly set about executing. Retreating to a small table, where he was shielded from the view of the group round Zaïda, by a couple of young Frenchmen who were playing cards, he took a letter from his pocket, tore off an unused half-sheet, and scribbled on it in pencil these words: —

"Do not trust this Muniz. They say he is going to marry you. Do not believe it, and do not in any way put yourself in his power.

"WALTER."

The scrap of paper containing these words he

folded very small, and then advanced to the ladies to bid them good-night. Mary Oakley looked into his face with a timid, pleading, sad look which almost destroyed his self-possession. He managed to pass his note unseen into her hand, and then he turned again to Madame Bertin with some remarks which he had carefully prepared. He wanted to give Mary time to read his warning before he left, in order to see how she would take it. As he had expected, she was woman enough to find a way to read it unsuspected under everybody's nose. Holding her feather fan before her, she unfolded the paper and deciphered the hasty scrawl.

Walter heard a deep-drawn breath. He looked round at her. She had sprung up from her seat, and was staring before her, at the floor, as if a chasm had opened suddenly at her feet. Then she looked up, looked around, and tottered as she tried to regain her chair. The Peruvian, who had never taken, for more than a few moments, his evil, covetous eyes from her beautiful face, hurried forward and would have supported her in his arms. But the girl looked down at him in horror.

“No, no,” she said, as if with an effort, like a child or a foreigner, trying to speak clearly and carefully.

Don Muniz still pressed his assistance upon her, not much caring, so it seemed to Walter's fiercely jealous eyes, whether it was unwelcome or not. The girl shivered as his ugly, brown, claw-like hands touched her bare arms ; then, with a low, hoarse cry of loathing, she turned upon him with such well-judged fierceness and suddenness, that the Peruvian, all unprepared, stumbled over the fringe of the hearthrug and fell to the ground.

Madame Bertin bleated out apologies, remonstrances, looking from one figure to the other of the group, horribly frightened. Especially she looked at her husband, and with such intensity of unspeakable despair that Walter's glance followed hers to the man's face. It was livid, cruel, the lips drawn back from the long, gleaming teeth, the face of a wild animal when the prey he is hungering for seems to be escaping him. The look of the Peruvian himself was mild compared with Bertin's.

The girl stood staring at Walter, crumpling up something tightly in her hand. Bertin, edging his way unobtrusively, step by step, towards her, pounced upon her hand, and tried to force the fingers open. He guessed that there was a note under the clenched fingers. But she would not give it up. She struggled ; and he had, for

shame's sake, to desist, seeing that she would not submit at once as he had expected. As soon as he let her go, she darted to the lamp, and held the scrap of paper over the glass until it curled and scorched, and at last burst into flame.

There was a new, passionate determination in the girl's face. Both Bertin and his wife watched her with something like fear; and through it all she had only uttered those two words — “No, no!”

Then they all tried to recover their ordinary demeanor; all, that is to say, but the young girl, who still stood by the lamp, looking furtively at the figures around her, almost as if they were eluding her sight like the hideous, half-seen visions of a nightmare. Walter dared not shake hands with her again; he dreaded rousing any further suspicion on the part of the man Bertin. Before he had quite recovered himself he found his plump hostess, in a state of great distress, half leading, half pushing him out of the room, with a running comment of the most uncomplimentary kind.

He scarcely saw her: his eyes were full of Mary Oakley's face as she gave him a last look: a look of pitiful sadness and entreaty which set his heart throbbing and his pulses beating rapidly. “Save me! save me!” So it seemed to him the look said.

## CHAPTER VIII.

WALTER felt, as he made his way back to his sister's flat, that he must take some step to save the girl he loved, even if his interference should bring him within the grasp of the strict French law. He feared the sensual Peruvian, and the enormous powers his money gave him ; but more, much more, he dreaded the crafty, thin-lipped Bertin, needy and greedy as he knew him to be.

Mrs. Plunket and Miss Halliday were entertaining some friends in the little *salon*, so Walter slipped quietly into the dining-room, drew a chair up to the table, and laid his head on his hands. He felt miserable and helpless. Mary's cry rang in his ears. Yet what could he do to help her ? He started up, and, going to the outer door of the flat, put it ajar, and watched. In about ten minutes' time Bertin and Don Muniz came out together. Walter heard the former assure the Peruvian, as he proceeded to accompany him

downstairs, that the treatment he had received at the girl's hands had been dictated by simple caprice.

Don Muniz, who, since his fall, was moving more slowly than ever, stopped short and looked Bertin full in the face.

"You are not conducting this affair with your usual ability, my friend," he said in a snarling tone. "The girl is handsome, very handsome, or I would not put up with such treatment as I have received to-night. But understand, if when I come to-morrow evening you have not schooled her into better behavior, it will be my last visit."

The Peruvian spoke in French, but rather slowly, so that the young Englishman, who was shamelessly playing eavesdropper, could make out almost all he said. Bertin's rejoinder he found scarcely less easy to understand.

"Señor," he said, in a low, but distinct voice, "I assure you the girl is merely playing the coquette, and that you will have no further trouble with her. If I may suggest, however, I think the time has come when a few diamonds, such as would seem but as grain for poultry to you, but which would dazzle a girl's eyes, might now be fittingly proffered. I have told the girl you are ready to do her the honor of marrying her — but it probably seems to her too much to

believe without some such evidence as that I humbly suggest."

The Peruvian half-turned, as if he would go back.

"If I had thought that," he said, "I would have offered her this."

And he touched a ring on one of his own dark fingers, in which was set a diamond of enormous size. The eyes of the other man glistened.

"No, no," he rejoined hastily, "do not despoil yourself, señor. On the contrary, let me advise you to appear before her as splendid as you like in your person. It will impress her. She is too inexperienced to say to herself: 'A man should not wear so much jewellery.' It will seem to her to suggest the luxury of a strange land."

The Peruvian laughed knowingly. The two men were now too far down the stairs for Walter to hear more of what they said. He heard faintly the sounds of their laughter as they went slowly further and further down, and then he retreated within his sister's door, feeling less ashamed at his own eavesdropping than amazed at the apparent folly of the Peruvian.

Was it possible that Don Muniz did not see through the adventurer's transparent artifice? If he presented himself at M. Bertin's on the following evening in any such magnificence as his

wily host suggested, Don Muniz would undoubtedly be robbed. And the robbery would just as undoubtedly be put down to La Belle Zaïda, to Mary ! The idea was too revolting to be borne.

A few minutes later Walter again rang the bell of Bertin's flat, and asked to see Madame. He had before now observed a sort of frosty kindness and nipped good-nature in the plump Frenchwoman's face, and he had resolved to try whether she could not be coaxed — or bought.

By this time the hired man-servant had gone away, and it was Madame herself who opened the door. She had evidently expected only her husband, for she wore a very old flannel dressing-gown, and had her head tied up comfortably in a sort of black bandage. The poor old thing cried out in alarm at sight of Walter, and tried to conceal herself behind the door, muttering assurances that M. Bertin was out, and that they did not receive visitors at this hour.

But Walter was obdurate.

“I know he is out, madame,” he said hurriedly, imploringly ; “that is why I have come. Listen to me, I beg, for one moment. You have a good, kind face, and I can trust you.”

As she still tried to shut him out, Walter, thinking this was no time for delicacy, real or false, took out his purse and put what gold he

had in it into her hand. Now this was business: Madame Bertin left off trying to shut the door, and listened to him while she dropped the coin into her pocket. It was a capacious pocket, perhaps not wholly unconnected with the occasional practise of shop-lifting, Walter thought, as he heard the gold pieces fall a long way down to the bottom. He pressed his advantage, taking the opportunity to insert the whole of his person inside the door.

“And if, madame,” he went on obsequiously, “you should find yourself at any time in any pressing difficulties, remember my purse is always at your service.”

She was a practical woman, and upon this, with a shrewd glance at him and a deep sigh, she took him into the room where, during the afternoon *séances*, she made the tea. She lit one candle, being of a frugal mind; besides, where is the use of keeping up a show of lavish luxury when you are in an old dressing-gown, with your head bound up? She sat down, clasped her hands in front of her plump person, and sighed. Walter, fearing the man Bertin’s return, dashed into his subject at once.

“I would do anything to help you, madame,” he said in a fiery whisper, “because I know you are kind to — Mary, Mary Oakley.”

Madame started violently ; her lips began to twitch, and her hands to tremble.

“ Mary ! ” she repeated. “ Who told you her name ? ”

“ She herself did,” answered Walter firmly ; “ I am going to marry her.”

Madame Bertin received the announcement with every sign of distress.

“ So you carry on with her secret correspondence ! ” she exclaimed, angrily. “ You set her against her guardians, who are like parents to her — the orphan ! You make her disobedient, you make her to refuse the good, rich husband they find for her ! You bad Englishman ! ”

Unable to bear her emotion quietly, Madame got up and waddled up and down, with one hand inside her pocket, shaking it with rage. The clinking of the gold pieces, however, seemed to exercise a soothing effect upon her. She stopped and looked at him with her head on one side.

“ You, you are not rich ? ” she said interrogatively, with one eye shut.

“ I am not very rich,” answered Walter truly enough, “ but I have enough to keep a wife, and to be good to her friends. And I am living with my sister, so that you could satisfy yourself as to my character, and make sure that I have not a wife already, which is more than you can be sure

of with that Peruvian — — ” beast, he had almost added, but checked himself in time.

“ Oh, ah ! ” replied Madame, with a shrug. “ One must risk those things. And as for a man’s character, it may not be very good, and he may yet make a tolerable husband. The girl who is too particular she remains old maid.”

“ But there is no fear of that for Mary, since here I am, asking for nothing better than to marry her immediately ! ”

“ Ah, well, I will see. I consult Monsieur Bertin,” said Madame, growing cautious, and glancing at the clock. “ He be here soon, and he be very angry to find you.”

Walter went towards the door. As she let him out, the old Frenchwoman suddenly softened a little towards him.

“ I am your friend,” she said, with a regretful sigh, “ I would rather you than the other. It is not everything — the money, and I love Zaïda. But my husband — — ” She paused, looked about her fearfully, and then hurried on rapidly with her confession. “ He gamble, he lose all he get ; he must have more, more. This Muniz, he offer much gold for the girl. And he promise to treat her well.”

“ Then you mean to *sell* her ! ” cried Walter indignantly.

As he uttered the words, a door opened, and Mary peeped out into the vestibule. Her beautiful face wore an expression, not of hopeless misery, but of passionate defiance. She had scarcely caught sight of him when Madame Bertin pushed Walter out on to the landing, and shut the door upon him. But not before he had judged, by the lighting up of the girl's face, that he had a right to constitute himself her champion.

Next morning he found on the balcony a letter from Mary. The first words filled him with wretchedness.

“Why have you come,” the letter began, “to change all life to me, and to make me ten times more miserable than I was before? Since I have known you my occupation seems distasteful, unworthy; my mind is poisoned against my guardians; my infirmity seems to throw upon me the shadow of an everlasting curse. Why did you ever look at me, speak to me, as you have done? You have opened my eyes to the evil, and I shudder at it. I see the Bertins care for nothing but the money I bring them; I see this Don Muniz is a bad man. I have grown suspicious of all things. I have seen Monsieur Bertin this morning; I told him the presence of the man Muniz was distasteful to me, and that, whether he said he wished to marry me or not, I would

not see him again. He heard me quietly, without contradicting or persuading: this frightened me again. Then he said Don Muniz would be here to-night, for the last time, and I must see him and give him my refusal myself. Otherwise Don Muniz would think he had been deceived. And Monsieur Bertin looks so strange to-day, and Madame so frightened, that I feel anxious. And it seems to me that I have detected preparations as if for going away. This flat was taken furnished by Monsieur Bertin, and I know that when he moves he moves quickly. If I never see you again — Good-by. I ought not to write this, but I feel so lonely, so lonely. You will forgive me, as you must and will forget me.

“ MARY OAKLEY.”

Going away! Going away! Going away! Through all the emotions which this letter roused in Walter, this fact dinned into his brain, at one moment stirring suspicion in him, at another reducing him to despair. For if Mary was willing to go with the Bertins on a sudden flight, he could do nothing. In the meantime, however, there was the evening’s work to be considered. M. Bertin had advised the Peruvian to bedeck himself gorgeously, and to bring diamonds. If Don Muniz should be simple enough, or enamored enough, to heed this advice, there was

little doubt that he would be robbed, and that poor Mary would be made to appear an agent in the robbery.

Walter was on fire all through that day. He took care to be smoking in the courtyard at nine o'clock that evening, the hour at which the evening receptions began. As he expected, a few minutes after the hour the Peruvian's carriage drove up ; and Don Muniz, getting out of it, made his way slowly into the house. Walter saw that his overcoat was unbuttoned, and that a great diamond, or cluster of diamonds, blazed in his shirt-front, while his dark fingers were loaded with rings.

“What a fool the man must be !” thought Walter. Yet the Peruvian did not look like a fool. The young Englishman wondered if he ought not to warn the man ; and then again — He followed Don Muniz within the doors of the house, still hesitating, deliberating. And then — he saw the Peruvian take from his pocket a tiny revolver, examine it, and put it back into the pocket of his overcoat.

Walter stepped without noise into the lift, reached the top floor first, waited until Don Muniz had rung at the Bertins' door and been admitted by Madame, and then, after the lapse of a few moments, pulled the bell himself.

After some delay Madame Bertin opened it. This fact was in itself suspicious, suggesting that for the work on hand it had been thought advisable to keep the hired man-servant out of the way.

“We do not receive to-night,” said Madame.

And she closed the door in his face without giving him time for a word. He rang again, and again, hoping that this proof of a dogged watchfulness would put them on their guard.

He did more than that. Feeling sure that there would be a violent scene that night between Bertin and the Peruvian, and thinking it probable that Bertin would try to escape, he resolved on a daring outrage of the liberty of the subject. If he had been in England he would have called in a policeman; but he did not know enough French to explain his case to a Parisian guardian of the law, and he already knew too much of *concierges* and their ways to hope for assistance from that quarter.

So he let himself into his sister’s flat by a private key, which he had coaxed her to get for him, found a gimlet, a screwdriver, and a handful of screws, among his own masculine rubbish, proceeded to take the bolt off a cupboard in his room, and returned hurriedly to the landing. He then screwed the bolt to M. Bertin’s door,

and the catch to the door-post. Having thus improvised the best obstacle he could to M. Bertin's expected flight, Walter went back to his sister's flat, made his way at once to the balcony, and began to smoke cigarette after cigarette, leaning against the partition.

It was all very well to laugh at the notion of the ornaments which he had placed upon M. Bertin's door. It was all very well to tell himself that necessity was the parent of invention, that desperate diseases needed desperate remedies, and so on. It was none the less undeniable that he had taken the law into his own hands in a way which French justice might look upon as unjustifiable ; and Walter was not easy in his mind. Supposing that his fears and Mary's should prove to have been without foundation, he would have done considerably worse than make a fool of himself. If it had not been for the cowardice of the thing, Walter would have gone back, and, meekly unscrewing the bolt, would have hidden it away with a muttered malediction. But he said doggedly to himself that he would stand to his colors. So he waited on the balcony and smoked on.

At last a low murmur of voices, which came to him on the night air from the Bertins' *salon*, seemed to grow louder. Walter could hear the

guttural voice of the Peruvian, and even detect the rising impatience in his tone. He heard also the voice of Madame Bertin, speaking soothingly, persuasively. And from time to time Mary monotonously cried “No, no, no!” It was clear to Walter that the three had been left together by the man Bertin, who thought the wooing of Don Muniz more likely to prosper in his absence than in his presence. But in this he was mistaken. More and more resolute grew Mary’s cry, “No, no, no!” until suddenly Walter’s listening ears detected a sound of fear in her tone.

He did not hesitate for one instant. During the last ten minutes he had employed himself in loosening the staples which held the zinc partition to the wall. With one rough pull he now tore it down, and got over the railing on to the Bertins’ balcony. The windows of the *salon* were open. He pushed aside the blind, and peeped in through the frilled muslin curtains.

The room was full of the soft light of wax candles, and the air heavy with the scent of flowers. Tired of his vain entreaties, Don Muniz, who carried in his hand a long flat case, which Walter guessed to contain jewellery, had risen to leave the room. But between him and the door stood Madame Bertin, pale, trembling, imploring him rapidly in a low voice to delay.

“Do not give up hope. It is a girl’s caprice. She will relent to-morrow; come and see her again to-morrow,” she begged, interposing her portly figure, so that he could not open the door.

But the Peruvian was furiously angry: he felt that he was being made a fool of.

“No, madame, not to-morrow or ever again,” he said, in his halting French and with a strong Spanish accent. “Who and what is this girl, that I should beseech and beg to her? You have deceived me, you and your husband. You said I had only to tell her I would marry her, and she would believe me, and go away with me without further question. But this has proved untrue. Then you said: Bring jewels to dazzle her eyes. So I bring to-night a necklace worth fifty thousand francs, and she pushes it away from her as if diamonds were dust to her. And now——”

“It is only her way, only her whim,” pleaded Madame Bertin. Then, in a still more coaxing tone: “Leave the necklace with me, only to-night, and see what I will do.”

But Don Muniz only chuckled dryly, and putting the case into an inside pocket, buttoned up his overcoat.

“No, madame,” he said quietly, “it is only to young women one gives diamonds.”

“ You mistrust me, señor ? ” said she pompously.

“ Entirely, madame,” was the instant reply.

And for a few moments they stood silently looking at each other, he watching for an opportunity to escape, she completely blocking the way. At last his eyes, seeing that to pass or to remove this obstacle was hopeless, began to rove round the room in search of another door.

“ Leave the necklace,” whispered Madame Bertin hoarsely, “ *as you value your life !* ”

Don Muniz started, and his right hand began to tremble as it sought something in the breast of his inner coat. Madame Bertin threw her great weight upon him, and, guessing perhaps what he was searching for, held fast his hands with no mean muscular power.

Meanwhile, Mary, who had her back turned to the others, was staring before her, evidently absorbed in the consideration of her own position, and taking no more notice of the excited words and movements of the man and woman behind her than if they had been a hundred miles away. Presently, however, her eyes, full of a mournfulness which pierced Walter to the heart, caught sight of a hand stirring the portière which divided the *salon* from the tea-room. The expression of her face changed to one of deadly

horror. Walter's eyes, following the direction of hers, saw what it was that alarmed her. The hand behind the portière held a revolver; there was a finger on it, and it was pointed towards someone in the room.

Mary uttered a loud cry, and swung suddenly round where she stood. Don Muniz had evaded Madame Bertin's grasp, and was making for a further door. Walter thought of the bolt on the outer door, which he had put to prevent the escape of a criminal, not a victim.

His momentary fear was thrown away. Before he could step inside the window, before Don Muniz could reach the door of the *salon*, there was a sharp report, and the Peruvian staggered back a few paces.

There was a moment's ghastly, horrible pause in the room. The hand had disappeared behind the portière. Madame Bertin stood wringing her hands, her white lips moving rapidly. Mary stood like a statue for a moment, and then ran forward towards the wounded man.

She was just too late. As she came up he swayed forward, recovered himself, swayed forward again, and fell dead at her feet.

## CHAPTER IX.

WALTER stepped through the long open window into the room. Madame Bertin rushed towards him, shrieking, accusing him of being the murderer of Don Muniz.

“No, madame,” said he quietly, “I am not the murderer ; I am the witness whose evidence will bring your husband to justice.”

She remained silent for a few moments after this, looking at the Englishman in a frightened manner, out of the corners of her eyes. Luckily for him, she then threw a rapid glance towards the portière. Thus warned, Walter left her suddenly, with an abrupt turn, and pulling aside the concealing curtain, discovered M. Bertin, revolver still in hand.

A curious sensation stole down Walter’s back ; another moment and, on the principle that dead men tell no tales, he himself would have been lying beside the Peruvian. In a spasm of not unnatural

rage, he snatched the revolver from the hand of the adventurer, whose eyes were glittering with strange fire.

“Let me go,” whispered the latter hoarsely. “I—I did not mean to harm you. Let me go. You have got the girl; what do you want with me?”

“I don’t want you, but I intend to keep you for somebody that will,” said Walter grimly. “You meant to murder that man, rob him, and escape, leaving this girl to bear the guilt of it, you cur. But you were just a little too cock-sure.”

“Well, and where would be the harm?” rejoined Bertin coolly. “In France they never punish a pretty woman; there are always ‘extenuating circumstances.’ La Belle Zaïda would simply be well looked after in a *maison de santé*.”

And he tapped his forehead.

“*Maison de santé!*” A madhouse! Walter’s brain seemed to reel. Even as he repudiated with passion the suggestion, he glanced at Mary with a little unacknowledged fear. For she had sank into a chair, and sat tapping the floor with one foot. And each time that the heel of her shoe touched the polished floor, she started violently. And each time that Madame Bertin moaned, or that the voices of the two men reached her, she

started again. While all the time her face, with the eyes fixed upon the dead body on the floor, wore an expression, not of horror, but of absolute stupefaction.

A dull dread crept through Walter's own brain.

Meanwhile, his fingers relaxed their hold of Bertin's arms; and the murderer, who had remained quite still, waiting for his chance, freed himself by a dexterous twist, and before Walter could stop him, sprang forward, and proceeded to rob the body before his eyes. With one quick movement he turned the body, with another he tore open the coat, with a third he seized the case of diamonds. Then, just as the Englishman, having recovered his wits, seized him by the collar, Bertin slid neatly out of his grasp, and made for the door.

“Stay, stop, think of me! Do not leave me like this!” implored his wife, in French.

But he did not pause an instant. Walter, remembering the bolt on the outer door, followed at leisure into the vestibule.

In the feeble light of a little lamp that swung from the roof, M. Bertin was trying to open the outer door. He turned the key, without result. He shook the door, he kicked it. At each fresh effort his movements became more feverishly

rapid, his breath came more quickly. Knowing that, for a few minutes at least, the man was secure, Walter, still retaining his hold of the murderer's revolver, watched him at a distance of a few feet, without word or movement.

Suddenly the man turned to listen. Some sound on the landing outside, which he seemed to recognize, had caught his ear. He bent his head to listen more closely, and Walter saw that his breathing was growing labored, as of a man under the influence of some great fear. He drew himself upright at last, and leaning for one moment heavily against the door, let Walter see a face rigid with horror.

“The gendarmes!” he hissed in a whisper that Walter scarcely caught.

This wretch, who had killed a fellow-man absolutely without emotion, could feel acutely for himself. Walter felt sick with disgust. The lamp-light was so feeble that until this moment he had escaped Bertin's notice. On perceiving him, the murderer broke out into a torrent of fierce abuse.

“Dog! Dog of an Englishman!” he exclaimed beneath his teeth. And for the first time Walter detected a strong foreign accent in his speech. “I was a fool to speak to you. You have brought me ill-luck. I saw it in your

cold English eyes the first moment I met you. I deserved this for not taking the warning." The gambler's superstition was peeping out of his narrow eyes, as he nodded his head several times, and seemed to be making a calculation. Then he turned suddenly to the young man. "And it is all thrown away, this trouble of yours, that is the best of it, upon a girl you cannot marry, who is afflicted, who ——"

He stopped. The bell was rung from the outside. With the step of a cat he glided stealthily away into the tea-room; and Walter, following him, saw him dart out upon the balcony, and make for Mrs. Plunket's flat.

The young man returned quickly to the vestibule, and in answer to a second ring, answered the door himself.

For the bolt he had put on the door had been drawn back on the outside.

On the landing stood two gendarmes; and Miss Halliday, with a very white face, stood at the door of Mrs. Plunket's flat. Walter started, and looked from the men to the lady.

"It is all right," said she, nodding her head reassuringly, "I reported these people as suspicious persons to the police two days ago. Tonight I saw a bolt outside the door, could not understand it, and sent for them."

“A murder has been committed,” said Walter, in halting French, as he gave up the revolver to one of the gendarmes. “The man has escaped into the next flat.”

Miss Halliday, who was not afflicted with “nerves,” and who only showed her excitement by a tightening of the lips and by the extra pallor of her face, made way for one of the men, while his comrade remained on the landing. Walter went in to help to secure the fugitive.

Bertin was caught in one of the bedrooms, just as he was in the act of concealing himself in a wardrobe. He was handcuffed and conveyed away by the gendarmes, when one of them had entered the adjoining flat and ascertained the truth of Walter’s report.

Mary was still in the *salon*. She had withdrawn to a corner of the room, and sat back in an armchair with her eyes closed and her head back on the cushion. There was on her face an expression of mingled horror and bewilderment, which filled Walter with dread. At every sound — the gendarme’s voice, Madame Bertin’s groans, Walter’s heavy tread — she shuddered, without opening her eyes.

“Won’t you speak to me?” he asked, in a low voice.

But gently as he spoke, she shivered, and, still

without opening her eyes, shrank further back into her chair.

He laid his hand very lightly, very respectfully, for a moment, on her arms. But before he could utter another word, she started up and stared at him, her lips moving, although no sound came from them. Her wild look wrung his heart.

“Oh, Mary,” he cried, “don’t look at me like that. It is not I who have brought this upon you, indeed it is not. This Bertin was a villain. You were not safe with him. But neither you nor Madame will suffer. Do you not believe that I will take care of you?”

She heard, but she did not answer, did not understand. She uttered a sort of confused sound, and sank again into the chair, with her hands to her ears, as if the sound of his voice hurt her. Walter drew back a step with a groan. A light hand on his shoulder made him start. Turning, he saw Miss Halliday, her kind face full of concern.

“Let me speak to her,” she said.

Mary’s eyes were fixed mournfully upon her. The slender little American woman went up to the girl, and put an arm fearlessly round her shoulders. Mary submitted, but shrinkingly.

“Will you let me take you into my room?”

she said in a very soft whisper, having seized the fact that the girl was preternaturally sensitive to noise. “It is quite near.”

Mary looked at her, watched the movement of her lips, but shook her head. Evidently the lady’s words were merely a noise in her ears and had to her no meaning. Miss Halliday glanced up at Walter. Her face was full of pity for both man and maid.

“We must take her away — from *that*,” said Ernestine, with a shuddering glance at the thing behind her on the floor.

Then she took to pantomime to express her meaning, and succeeded better. With a few gestures of invitation she persuaded the girl to rise, and turning her head away from the Peruvian’s body, over which a cloak had been thrown, she led her into Mrs. Plunket’s flat. The gendarme left in charge of the body stopped Miss Halliday on her way out, and she had to explain to him that she was only taking the girl to another room on the same floor. He demurred a little, and only consented to this when he found that by standing at the door of Bertin’s flat he could command a view of that of Mrs. Plunket. The man was exceedingly civil, but explained that this precaution was absolutely necessary until the arrival of his superior officer, as the girl

might be accused of complicity in the crime. These words, which gave a great shock to Walter, fell unheeded upon Mary's ears.

Walter went back into the Bertins' flat to try to comfort the murderer's unfortunate wife. He found the task less difficult than he had expected, as the lady was sinking by this time into a state of half-stodgy, half-philosophical resignation to the inevitable.

“I knew it would come some day, I was certain he would go too far. I always said so,” she murmured, clasping her hands and staring at the gendarme. “And now it has come. He will be imprisoned, and I—I may starve, I suppose. Well, I have been near enough to that before. And they will not guillotine him: they will find extenuating circumstances, and he will get perhaps five years, perhaps ten. *Hé bien! C'est la volonté du bon Dieu!*”

And, with a deep sigh, Madame settled herself further into the chair, and awaited the course of events.

When Walter learned, on the arrival of a fresh contingent of police, that both Mary and Madame Bertin would have to be arrested on suspicion of complicity in the murder, he started up, with a vague British notion of disabling the officers of the law by personal combat, and

carrying Mary off to a place of safety before their eyes. Fortunately Miss Halliday acted as interpreter, and succeeded in convincing him that the arrest was only a matter of form, that the ladies would be most tenderly treated, and that they would be set free when their depositions had been taken. He himself was taken to a *Bureau de Police*, where he made a statement, and was bound over to appear at the ensuing trial.

He went back to his sister's flat in a state of profound depression. His sister, who was exceedingly annoyed on hearing the unpleasant story in which he had played a part, checked her expressions of annoyance and disgust when she caught sight of his face. Miss Halliday, having made herself his friend in the matter, he permitted to lead him into the *salle à manger*, and give him some wine. After a long silence, which he did not attempt to break, he addressed her.

“What do you think — about it — about her?”

Ernestine looked troubled.

“I am afraid to say.”

“You think — good heavens! I can't say it! you think — she — ”

He touched his forehead.

“I — am afraid so.”

After a pause Walter spoke again in a harsh whisper. His head was in his hands: he was broken down, miserable almost beyond endurance.

“ Yet she wrote to me as sensibly as you could have done. I—I will show you the letter.”

He drew out his treasure and stooped over her as she read it. Ernestine sprang up from the perusal of it with a start.

“ I have an idea, a good one,” she said. “ You must go to England at once — you can manage it — you can be back in time for the trial. You must find out the girl’s friends.”

“ Madame Bertin would tell me nothing about them. I don’t know how to set about it.”

“ Well, it’s got to be done, and the sooner you set about it the better.”

“ Won’t you tell me what your idea is ? ”

“ No. You would stay here, trying to go to work at the wrong end, if I did. Go to-morrow morning. I will make it right with your sister as far as I can. But who knows ? I may be sending you to perdition.”

“ Nonsense ! ” said Walter; “ what harm is there in a man’s choosing his own wife ? ”

Miss Halliday changed color a little.

“ You don’t know yet whether she is even sane ! ” she said, rather impatiently.

“ I am convinced that she is. There is some

mystery about her, of course, but I will not believe it is that."

"And nothing short of that will prevent your marrying her?"

"Nothing."

"Well, I don't know that I think the worse of you for being utterly unreasonable. Good-night.

"Good-night. Bless you for your goodness a thousand times."

Miss Halliday smiled, and looked down on his fair hair rather sadly as he bent his head to kiss her hand.

His blessing for her — who would have worshipped him — his love for the girl who at the most would accept his worship. Well, well, it was the law of the world. And, when you come to think of it, Nature knows what she is about when she puts into a young man's heart the determination to take to wife her who seems to him the fairest.

## CHAPTER X.

NEXT morning Walter started for London, leaving a note of explanation for his sister, and referring her to Miss Halliday to fill the gaps in his somewhat incoherent narrative. Having had time on the journey to arrange his plans, he went straight to Scotland Yard. Here he made inquiries as to the man Bertin, who was, however, under that name at any rate, quite unknown there. Having explained that he had reason to suppose that this man and his wife had taken a young girl named Oakley from the custody of her friends, one of the police-officers before whom he made the statement repeated the name.

“Oakley! Mary Oakley!” said he. “I think there were bills out six months ago or so, about someone of that name.”

A search was made in the books, and in a few minutes the inspector in charge cleared

his throat and read out the following announcement:—

“MISSING, A YOUNG GIRL.

Supposed to have been decoyed away from her friends. Tall, fair, pale complexion, of prepossessing appearance — *deaf and dumb* — ”

Walter started violently. The whole mystery fell to pieces in an instant. Her silence, her apparent indifference to what was passing around her the ease with which her friends' search for her, had been evaded — all was explained.

“I see,” he exclaimed. “That is she. Go on, please.”

The officer read on —

“Name, Mary Oakley. Age, 18. Particulars to the Police, or to Mrs. Oakley, — Street, London, W.”

Walter got into a hansom and drove to the address given. It was a lodging-house of the dingy type. He asked for Mrs. Oakley, very much fearing that the lady would have gone away. The answer of the girl who opened the door, however, reassured him.

“Yes, sir. What name, sir?”

In a few moments Walter was entering a bare-looking, shabbily furnished room on the second floor.

A tiny old lady, who seemed still redolent, amid the smuts and smoke of London, of the country fields and lanes where she had passed her life, held out her *left* hand to him. Her face was quivering with excitement, and her voice was scarcely steady.

“ You will forgive my left hand,” she began, as she put her little withered fingers in the young man’s broad palm, “ my right is paralyzed.”

At every step fresh light was breaking in upon Walter. What could be easier, since the old lady could not write herself, than for the Bertins to deceive Mary with letters purporting to be dictated by her aunt?

“ I have brought you news of your niece Mary, madam,” he began.

The old lady bent her head gravely.

“ I knew it would come,” she said simply. “ The spirits told me so, and I waited patiently.”

More light again. Mary, having been brought up by a believer in “ Spiritism,” had been an easy prey to the professional quackery of the Bertins.

“ But it is not all good news that I bring,” he went on. “ She is at present in very unhappy circumstances, the people she is with having brought themselves within reach of the law. But she will soon be free from that trouble. Only

— I am going to give her to you with one hand, only to take her away with the other."

" Ah ! " said the old lady, " that is always the way ! "

To Walter's surprise, she asked him very few questions, and was evidently a simple-minded, superstitious creature, who took the world easily. She was, however, grateful to him for putting an end to her anxiety, and she chatted away to him, giving him all the details of her own life and of Mary's with a child-like ingenuousness which was not without charm.

Her poor husband had adopted his dead brother's child when she was little more than a baby, the old lady said. Mary had lost her hearing through a fright when she was only a tiny child, learning to speak. Her vocal organs were unimpaired by the accident, but had been useless to her ever since, as, through not being able to hear, she could not learn to talk.

" She can only utter the few words she had already learnt when the accident happened," went on Mrs. Oakley.

Walter remembered the few baby words which had dropped so strangely from her lips in his sister's *salon*.

" There was a clever doctor in our neighbourhood," continued Mrs. Oakley, " who declared that

he did not believe her complete cure impossible. My poor husband, who was very ill at the time, made me promise to bring her to London, to one of the great ear-doctors. So when he was gone I did so. On our journey up we met a very clever man, who shared my own beliefs about the spirits of those we love," and the look of the enthusiast shone in the little old lady's eyes; "and he was much struck with Mary, and wanted to take her away to travel round the country with him and his wife. He said that he could teach her palmistry, and to read the stars," went on Mrs. Oakley quite simply, "and that she could earn enough to keep herself and me. For my poor husband left us very badly off." And she gave another grave shake of the head. "Mary was all for going with them, but I refused. We came on to London, and parted at the station from these people, and I thought little more about them. I found some quiet lodgings, where, as I thought, I could leave Mary safely while I went about visiting some old friends."

The old lady flushed a little, and Walter guessed that she had perhaps, in the new excitement of visiting, neglected her niece a little.

"Well," she went on, "at last one day I came back, and found that she was gone. The landlady said that some friends had called upon her,

whom Mary herself let into the house, and whom the woman did not see. She went out with them, and, as you know, she did not come back. I advertised : it was of no use. But I knew, for the spirits told me, that I should find her again some day.”

And she sat back quite happily, with her little hands folded, and a pleased excitement in her eyes.

Walter thought that this very silly old lady did not deserve to have her niece back at all, and his remorse at the thought of taking the girl from such a guardian melted away. He wrote a letter to Mary at her dictation, and then took his leave as quickly as possible.

On the following evening Walter was again in Paris. He was pursued by an idea, a hope. A doctor had said that Mary’s deafness might be curable. Walter asked himself, remembering that strange new sensitiveness she had shown on the occasion of the murder, whether she was not cured ? As a shock had deprived her of hearing, might not another shock have restored it ? Full of excitement he arrived at his sister’s flat. Ernestine Halliday was the first person to meet him. There was an expression on her face which made him ask what had happened.

“ A miracle,” she answered with a very sweet smile, “ or almost a miracle.”

Walter stood still, scarcely daring to put the questions his hopes suggested.

“Mary——” he said presently, while his lips trembled.

“She is here.”

“And—the miracle? I know her secret. She—was deaf and dumb.”

“Was deaf and dumb,” echoed Ernestine with tremulous lips.

“Well?” said Walter in an eager whisper.

“She is not now. The shock has given her back her hearing. She can be taught to speak, if anyone can be found with sufficient patience to teach her.”

Walter looked at her with tears starting to his eyes.

“Where is she?” he asked in a whisper.

“In the *salon*; a celebrated aurist is with her now.”

Walter looked at her gratefully. “That is *your* doing,” he said.

“Of course. Would you grudge me a hand in your happiness?”

Walter could not answer. Presently he entered the *salon*. Mary, who had not expected to see him, sprang up from her chair, clasping her hands. The great doctor smiled, held out his hand to Walter, and said something in French

which the young fellow was too stupefied with his happiness to fully understand. He made out, however, enough to understand that the girl's infirmity was cured. Then the doctor withdrew, very quickly, very quietly; so that the young people scarcely noticed when or how he went.

Forgetting that, although she could now hear, she had not yet learnt to understand, Walter began to tell her about his journey and his finding her aunt. She shook her head and smiled, and said half mournfully, "No, no," in her baby language. Walter took up a pencil and paper, and wrote down the particulars of his discovery of her aunt. Then he glanced up at her with a flush on his face, looked down again, and wrote on:—

"I've told her, though, that she can't keep you." Then he looked up again at Mary. She was watching his pencil, and blushing. On he scribbled again:—"You will want someone to teach you to talk." Again he paused. Then he put down the pencil, and stood up beside her.

He said nothing for a minute or two, and did not even dare to look in her face. At last, however, he ventured to raise her bent head with his hands, so that she could watch the movement of his lips.

“Will you let me teach you?” he asked at last, very, very softly.

She understood.

Although Mary made rapid progress under Walter’s tuition, both in talking and in understanding what he said, he could not wait for her to learn to tell him by word of mouth the whole story of her life with the Bertins. She had to write out a full account of it for him, and to explain the methods by which, in spite of her late affliction, she was enabled to understand whatever they said to her. When they spoke English, she explained, she could follow the movements of their lips, as she had been brought up in England to do. She could, therefore, she admitted, have understood more than she had appeared to do of what Walter said at their first meeting, but for a feeling of shyness which caused her to keep her eyes away from his face. The Bertins had also a code of signals for small everyday occurrences, so that, for instance, the apparently angry stamp of the adventurer’s foot, which had so greatly incensed Walter, was merely a signal to Mary that it was time to come indoors. Her observation, too, was rendered so acute by the continual silence in which she lived, that she could frequently tell, without looking round, when another person had entered the

room, by the vibration of the floor. Thus it was that she had puzzled Walter on one occasion by seeming to *hear* the noiseless tread of M. Bertin on the balcony behind her, when, as a matter of fact, she had *felt* it.

Mary added that the Bertins, no doubt seeing the professional value of the mystery her silence created, took every means to conceal the reason of it, and always professed to be utterly unable either to use or to understand the alphabet of the fingers.

“And until you came,” so ended Mary’s written narrative, “I never wanted to speak. But after that I cried every night because I could not. For I knew very well that if you knew me for what I was, you could never think of me again — ”

Walter, who was reading over her shoulder as she wrote, stopped her pen, knelt down beside her, and added this one line :

“If you had remained deaf and dumb I should have married you just the same.”

There was only one fact to add to her story ; and after another short lesson in speech, such as her indefatigable tutor was always ready to give her, Mary wrote it down :

“When I turned round in the *salon* that evening, and saw those awful sights — the hand

— the revolver — the man swaying as he stood — something seemed to break in my head, and a horrible torrent of sounds burst upon me. I did not understand ; I thought I had gone mad. All that day I was out of my senses, I think. The noise — the dinning noise — after the long, long quiet was unendurable. It was not till the night came, and I was alone, that suddenly it came into my mind that I was not deaf any more ; that I could hear, that I was cured ! Then, in spite of all the horrors of that day, I cried with tears of happiness. For I thought of *you*, and I said to myself : ‘It is not wrong of me to think of him any more !’ ”

The girl stooped low over her pen as she wrote these words, blushing for maidenly shame, trembling for happiness. It was only by force that Walter succeeded in getting a sight of those tell-tale words.

And then he gave her another lesson, teaching her the old, old verb, which, in every language, we all learn so easily !

Of course a merciful French jury found extenuating circumstances for M. Bertin ; and his wife was left to pursue their occult calling alone during the term of his imprisonment. She would have been well cared for by Walter in consideration of her real personal affection for

Mary ; but an uneasy conscience on the score of the kidnapping of the girl caused Madame Bertin to keep out of his way. For it was she who, during one of Mrs. Oakley's absences from her London lodgings, had taken a letter to the girl, purporting to be from her aunt, saying that the latter had been called away into the country for a day or two, and recommending Mary to accept Madame Bertin's invitation to spend the time with her. Then it had been easy to deceive the girl by a series of letters written by a confederate of the Bertins from London, which Mary supposed to have been dictated by her aunt. Her answers to these letters were always taken by M. Bertin "to post :" it is needless to say that Mrs. Oakley never received them. Thus they were enabled to leave the country without exciting the suspicions of the innocent girl, who, being assured in one of the made-up letters that her aunt had no longer any objection to her earning her living in the way M. Bertin had proposed, was by that gentleman instructed in his so-called science of palmistry, and became by her beauty a very valuable attraction to his *séances*. Although she had been vaguely uneasy and unhappy with these people, their conduct towards her had been so careful that she had never suspected their integrity until Walter Drake appeared upon the scene.

They were married almost immediately, in spite of Mrs. Plunket's protests. And Ernestine Halliday, having developed an inclination to matrimony, became the wife of a middle-aged English gentleman, in every way worthy of her, and in every way a more suitable match for her than Walter.

But to the end of her days she will cherish the belief that it was Walter she loved best.

**THE END.**





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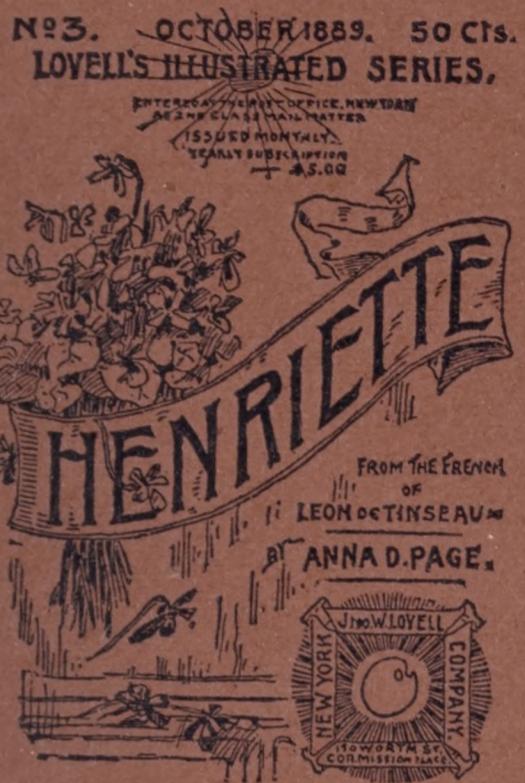
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